
INTERNAL MIGRATION PROCESSES AND EMERGING COMMUNITIES IN RURAL AREAS IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: Intensified internal migration processes have long depopulated the villages, overflowing the population from the village to the city. The process of depopulation of Bulgarian villages has long been speeded up and has already given its visible results. The long-term tendency of intensive depopulation of entire regions of our country has questioned the future of the Bulgarian village. The modern state of the villages in many regions is an illustration of targeted criminal plundering, the almost complete destruction of Bulgarian agriculture and the expulsion of people from their homeland, due to economic reasons. Despite this disastrous picture, there is still some optimism. The reason for this is the tendency for people (often young, highly educated and family) to leave cities and prefer the village life. This increased interest could be seen as a positive sign for the revival of the interest in the Bulgarian village. According to the experts, these migration processes are lasting and will continue in the future as the data show that the Bulgarian village is not dying but rather is being restructured. A process of formation of new communities and identities is observed. It is the result not only of modern processes in society and the economy, but also carries a characteristic of the information society and the digitalization of life. This article is an attempt to outline the emerging communities in the rural areas of the country, as our research focus is not only on the people who form them, but also on the characteristics of the new communities themselves. In this regard, once we have established on the basis of statistics that the process of migration to the villages is increasing, we can put to verification our research questions and hypothesis: What is the nature of this migration? What are the people who return to live in a village? And above all – what are the reasons and motives and reasons that make them look for the village and abandon life in the city? Our conclusions are based on National statistics institute data as well as a combination of several methods of collecting information, including: Desk research of electronic media materials, as well as a series of specially held by the author in-depth interviews. On this basis, conclusions are drawn about the characteristics of these new IT rural communities; about the motivation, attitudes, values and expectations of rural life. Thus, we could get some insight into where the potential of the village lies, which could possibly be used for its development and future.

Keywords: de-urbanization, internal migration processes, new rural communities, new identities, IT villages, life style.

1. INTRODUCTION

The long-term trend of intensive depopulation of entire regions of our country has called into question the future of the Bulgarian countryside. Bulgaria's membership in the European Union and participation in the Rural Development Program do not change the negative trends and gloomy forecasts for the future of Bulgarian villages. The current state of villages in many regions is an illustration of deliberate criminal robbery, the almost complete destruction of Bulgarian agriculture and the expulsion of people from their homeland for economic reasons. However, in the last 4-5 years there has been a tendency for young, highly educated and family people to leave the cities and prefer rural life. (Чалева, 2019), (Economic.bg, 2020).

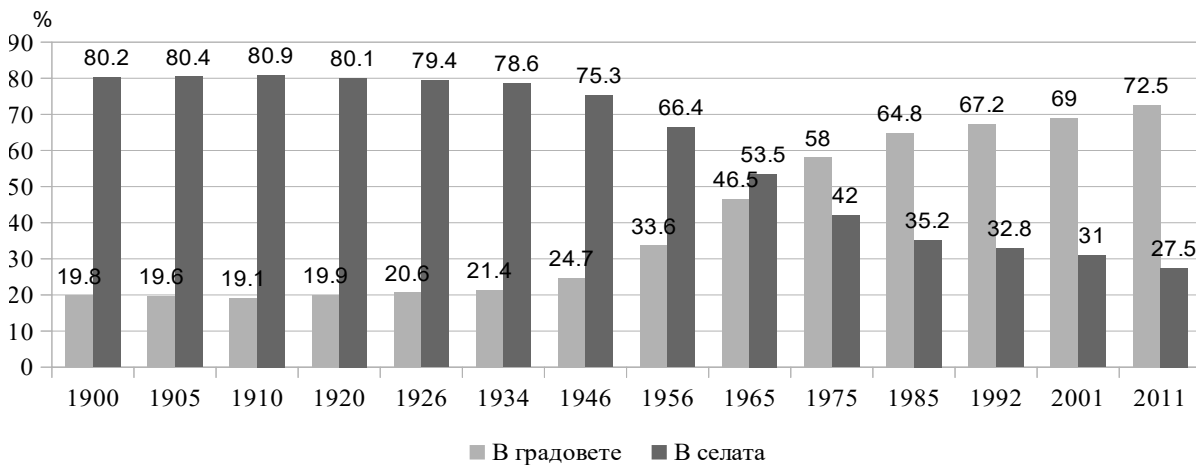
This article is an attempt to outline the emerging communities in the country's rural areas. Our research focus is not only on the people who shape them, but also on the characteristics of the new communities themselves. In this regard, once we find that the process of migration to the villages is increasing, the questions become possible: What is the nature of this migration? What are the people who return to live in the countryside? And most of all - what are the reasons and motives that make them look for the village and abandon life in the city? Thus, we could get some idea of where the potential of the village lies, which can be used for its development and future. Our conclusions are based on statistical data from the NSI (National Statistical Institute), as well as a combination of several methods for collecting information including: 1) Desk research of electronic media materials, 2) In-depth interviews. Interviewed were persons in the age group 25-45 years - married and unmarried, who: 1) Have already settled in the countryside; 2) They will do it very soon or 3) They have specific intentions to do it in the near future. The interviews were conducted in the period 20.07. - 02.08.2020. In order to preserve the anonymity of the respondents, only their gender is mentioned in the text.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM. INTERNAL MIGRATION PROCESSES AND THE STATE OF THE BULGARIAN VILLAGE

The beginning of the intensive process of migration from the village to the city began during the communist era, when a record decrease in the rural population was registered in Bulgaria for a quarter of a century. 1989 they still retained their vital functions - providing a livelihood for the people living in these areas; producing a significant share of the production intended for feeding the entire population of the country; providing sufficient production not only for the domestic market but also for export. After Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in 2007, unfortunately the results of the utilization of funds allocated by the European Commission to boost production and improve life in the Bulgarian villages are negligible.

The process of total depopulation of some parts of the country began after the fall of the communist regime. 1989 marks the beginning of the process of gradual destruction of Bulgarian agriculture. Due to lack of livelihood, economic and life prospects, young people leave the villages in masse and the elderly and not very educated people remain there (Белчев, et. all, 2019), (БНТ, 2018). Vast areas of arable land are deserted, and Bulgaria is turning from an exporter to an importer of agricultural products. Whole, mostly rural, areas in northwestern Bulgaria, the Fore-Balkans, Kyustendil, Pernik and Strandzha fall into the category of the least populated regions in Europe - comparable, for example, only to the polar tundra in Sweden and Finland (Цеков, 2015). NSI census data for a period of almost 100 years eloquently outline the process of depopulation and destruction of the Bulgarian countryside. According to the 2011 census (still recent), the trend of urbanization persists - 5,339,001 people, or 72.5%, live in cities, and 2,025,569 people, or 27.5% of the country's population, live in villages (НСИ, 2011). Graph 1 below clearly shows the trend of depopulation of villages and the transformation of cities into a major center of attraction for the population.

Graph 1. Structure of the population in the towns and villages by years of censuses for the period 1900 - 2011

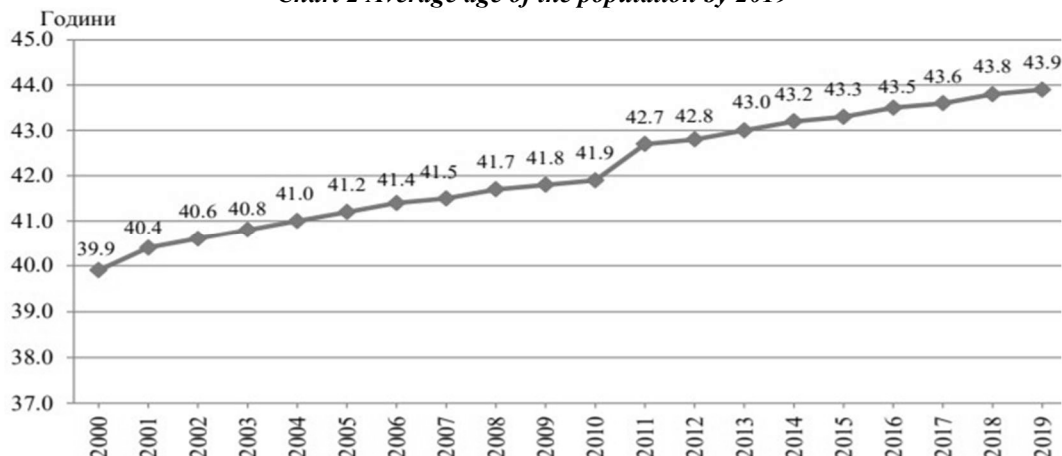


Source: НСИ, 2011

In terms of age structure, the largest is the relative share of the population aged 65 and over. As of 31 December 2019, the total age dependency ratio in Bulgaria is 56.4%, or each person in the dependent ages (under 15 and over 65 years) has less than two persons of active age. For comparison, in 2018 this ratio was 55.5%. This ratio is more favorable in the cities - 52.8% than in the villages - 67.5%. In all districts of the country this indicator is over 50.0% with the exception of Sofia (capital) - 48.1%, as the most unfavorable ratio is in the districts of Vidin - 72.4%, Gabrovo - 68.8%, and Lovech - 68.1%.

The aging of the population leads to an increase in its average age, which increased from 40.4 years in 2001 to 43.9 years at the end of 2019 (НСИ, 2020 (a)). The aging process of the population is manifested both in the villages and in the cities, as in the cities the average age of the population is 43.0 years, and in the villages - 46.5 years. Graphs 2 present the data on the average age of the population according to NSI data, which illustrate well the aging processes to date. (НСИ, 2020 (a)).(Graph 2)

Chart 2 Average age of the population by 2019



Source: НСИ, 2020 (a)

The picture of the deteriorating age structure of the population is of particular concern in terms of the fact that it reflects on the distribution of persons below, in and above working age, as well as on the quality and quantity of the labor force. According to official statistics since 2001, the share of the working population in the villages is progressively declining and reaches in 2019 to 106 298 people. (МТСП, 2020). By 2019, the employment rate of able-bodied persons (15-64 years) in cities is 58%, while in villages this ratio is 43.7%. (НСИ, 2020 (b)). *The coefficient of economic activity of the population* (15 - 64 years) also differs in terms of place of residence. In the cities this indicator is 74%, while in the villages it is 64.5% (НСИ, 2020 (a)), which also speaks of the great discrepancies between the town and the village.

Despite these disastrous statistics, there is still a touch of optimism. The reason for this is the tendency registered in recent years for people (often highly educated, married and young) to leave the cities and prefer rural life, although in absolute terms their number is still far from the critical point in which the trend should be permanently inverted) (24 часа, 2015), (АБС, 2016), (Вучкова, 2015), (Новинар, 2015). This increased interest could be considered as a positive sign for the revival of interest in the Bulgarian countryside. Record migration from the city to the village is reported by the national statistics for the first four months of 2015. **The migration from the city to the village already has a larger relative share - 26.3% compared to the opposite direction - from the village to the city (21%). 54% of people who move to live in the countryside are of working age** - from 18 to 45 years, and the rest are mostly new retirees (НСИ, 2020 (a)), (АБС, 2016). NSI data also show that when moving from the city to the village, people up to the age of 39 leave with their whole family. In internal migration largest share have so called "young pensioners" - these are people who are returning to their homes after the end of his career (НСИ, 2020 (c)).

3. EMERGING COMMUNITIES. PROFILE OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE CHOSEN TO LIVE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Despite this disastrous picture, there is still some optimism. The reason for this is the tendency of people (often young, highly educated and married) to leave the cities and prefer rural life (Цветков, 2015), (Чалева, 2019), (Economic.bg, 2020). This increased interest can be seen as a positive sign of revival of interest in the Bulgarian countryside. According to experts, these migration processes are permanent and will continue in the future, as the data show that the Bulgarian village is not dying, but rather restructuring (Вучкова, 2015), (Капитал, 2017). There is a process of formation of new communities and identities. It is a result not only of modern processes in society and the economy, but also carries a characteristic of the information society and the digitalization of life. (Новинар, 2016), (Цветков, 2015).

The information obtained from the conducted desk research and in-depth interviews allows systematizing, albeit in very large strokes, the type of people who go to live in the countryside. In the first place, as it became clear from the presented data, are the pensioners, who after the end of their working life retire to their native villages (or to their rural villa) to live their old age in peace and fresh air. The other group is people of working age (approximately between 20 and 50 years old), among whom:

- People who completely give up their previous professions and qualifications, with the idea to make a living from their garden and just live in the countryside, devoting themselves entirely to growing food (for their own consumption) and a quiet life. Usually their "relocation" is individual (or at the family level and very rarely in a wider group).

- Young people who keep and continue to practice their previous professions (mostly those that can be done remotely, thanks to modern technology), and their occupation in agriculture is only peripheral. It is the last category that we will deal with in more detail here. We focus on the study of this type of people and the phenomenon of "IT village", because the very concept of them implies the settlement of a village not by an individual, but directly by a whole group of people (mostly - married). In this case, we observe not an individual withdrawal from the city and a certain way of life ("Singly salvation"), but the consolidation of the individual decisions of each (to leave the city) with the others and (almost) simultaneous action of all. This makes the phenomenon of a completely different scale, allowing us to observe the emerging a community right before our eyes.

Let's examine the characteristics of these people and, looking for what they have in common, try to find out what forms them as a group. Above all, these are people who have united voluntarily, based on certain common interests, values, worldviews, lifestyles, life plans, similar types of professions and, of course, the opportunity to work from anywhere in the world. All this is a solid basis for closeness and the natural creation of a certain sense of community - even before they actually live together (in the period of organizing the group and the first stages of realization of the idea). Subsequently, this closeness will deepen further and with the passage of time and common daily and everyday problems, care and collective decisions to maintain their lives in the village, the community will consolidate more and more. And since the key term in this text is "IT village", let's clarify what exactly is behind it.

4. IT VILLAGES - WHAT ARE THEY REALLY?

The IT village is a completely new phenomenon in our country. The main idea is to gather a group of people practicing the so-called "Liberal professions". These are all the so-called freelancers - mostly specialists in the field of information technology: programmers, web and graphic designers, software engineers, etc. but also copywriters, translators, even accountants, landscape architects, people of science and art - artists, photographers and many others - who have the opportunity - precisely because of the nature of their work - to work remotely, using modern information technologies (Новинар, 2016), (Цветков, 2015). Here is in particular the idea described by the visionary of one of the first IT settlements in our country - Ivan Kukov, a programmer from Varna: "The essence of the idea is 40-50 young couples of programmers to buy houses in the countryside, each working from home or from a makeshift office building." (Новинар, 2016).

In general, people in the IT industry are quite well informed and have a good general culture, thanks to the fact that they have access to any type of information that interests them. Almost all of the interviewees are well acquainted with the ways of healthy eating, beekeeping, gardening and would gladly combine their daily work with some activity in the real world, not in front of the computer. According to Mr. Kukov, the resettlement of programmers in depopulated villages will lead to the creation of new jobs for people with other professions. Kindergartens, primary schools, doctors, private security, cafes, restaurants, etc. will be needed in the unique villages, which will breathe new life. There is even an idea to work for older people to serve small private vegetable gardens (Новинар, 2016). This gives a really wide horizon for optimism about the infusion of life and the development of the settlement in which an IT village is established.

5. THE REPULSIVE AND ATTRACTING FACTORS FOR MIGRATION TO THE VILLAGE

In order to explain migration processes, as is well known, it is necessary to identify the factors that give rise to attitudes and desires for migration (regardless of internal or external). In analyzing the repulsive and attracting factors that motivate these young people to organize their lives in the countryside, we came to the systematization of the following main factors: (Of course, all findings and conclusions made here are valid for the surveyed our faces. However, they provide a good guide and basis for future research to verify the results and conclusions for larger groups of people.):

What makes young people run away from the city? (Repulsive factors)

- *The stress of hectic city life:* „And we sincerely hope that we will never have to live in Sofia again. Because we realized that behind the convenience of the big city lies an ominous exchange - the freedom of the soul in exchange for money, amenities and luxury.“ (Man) (*The quotations enclosed in quotation marks are selected from the statements of our respondents as particularly significant and summarizing.*)

- *Polluted urban environment, noise and traffic:* „ We were expecting a child and we wanted the best for him! Our son was born in Sofia and hell became even bigger. We lived on a noisy boulevard with a tram line. I regularly removed the washed children's clothes black from the balcony. I stumbled the stroller on broken sidewalks, I was chased by stray dogs, the overflowing garbage cans smelled - and we are talking about an "elite" district of Sofia.“ (Woman)

- *Tense, aggressive and unpleasant relationships between people in general:* „In the city, at bus stops, on

public transport or in the car - everyone is nervous, somehow sullen and somehow you believe that they are ready to scold you, push you or steal something.... And it often happens, if we speak the truth. And you are left with such an unpleasant feeling. And the bad thing is that we are already used to it.“ (Man)

- *The “9 to 6” work model, which most respondents see as a “modern slavery”:* „When we decided to leave our "well-paid", "promising career development" job in a "young team" of a "fast-growing company", many people thought we were crazy It turned out that we were not just tired. *We were exhausted from the life spent in a hurry, in the subway, in the office, in the panel, in counting the remaining days until the next vacation.* Our lives turned upside down when we went to the countryside. We began to live, not just experience. We realized how much we sacrificed in the name of nothing.“ (Янева, 2018).

Why do young people choose village life? (Attracting factors)

- *Closeness to nature:* “I decided to raise my little baby here because I want it to grow in the song of the crickets under the starry sky, among the scent of bouquets and mowed grass... A scent that smells in my mind since childhood. A memory that I want my child to have!“ (Woman);

- *Natural life without stress:* „What made me return from London to Zhizhevo? Calmness. And that I don't even have to pay for the air I breathe, as it was in England.“ (Woman);

- *Peace, quiet, clean environment:* „Life is several times calmer, the air cleaner, people more smiling.“ (Man).

- *Life without haste and large doses of daily stress:* „We do not miss the work in elite companies, we do not miss the dynamics, we even have a different view of money as just paper. Shine and vanity are already foreign to us“ (Man).

- *More freedom and time for loved ones and favorite activities:* „In the village for the first time I felt that I live. For the first time, I'm in no hurry, I already have time - for everything I didn't have time before.“ (Man)

- *Natural, healthy, food:* „As for our daily lives - we are open to a healthy lifestyle that requires quality food and peace of mind. We have a fairly large yard and we produce some of our food personally, but not in the familiar traditional way, but according to the ideas of permaculture societies.“ (Woman).

- *Better relationships with others:* „And most importantly - how to be a good person. Because the real thing in the Rhodopes is the humanity, preserved in time. The big and good hearts of the people.“ (Woman)

- *Opportunity for relaxation and improving the connection with nature and with yourself:* „I enjoy every sprig of flower, the lilac in the garden and its intoxicating aroma, the night sounds of crickets, the song of early larks and midnight mowers, the beautiful morning dew on the mown grass... The hope that fills my soul at the sight of these views! I feel happy!“ (Woman).

- *Good place to raise a child:*

- „We are now smiling, cheerful and calm. We know this is best for our child. And for us too.“ (Man).

- „The world is big. Today we like it here... Tomorrow maybe somewhere else. But there is no better life for raising a small child than living in a small town in the mountains! When he grows up, let him choose his own path, but I will be calm that I have shown him where his roots are, even where the milk comes from, what and how the earth gives birth, what are the real and unadulterated relations between people. (Woman).

- *Freedom - to break away from the system:* „A dream of a small town and a big house. For nature and free time. For peace of mind. And happiness. As if in a dream we found ourselves in the small Rhodope town, away from the hustle and bustle, stress, conquests.“ (Man).

- *Tourism and outdoor activity:* „I have collected more memories in the last few months than in the last few years. Mountain biking, canoeing, diving, picnics, hiking, sleeping outdoors... " (Man).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we can conclude that there is a generation of a new identity inherent in the emerging communities in the so called IT villages. On the basis of the conducted indicative research on the topic we have reason to conclude that new, authentic communities are actually being created, whose members choose to live in the countryside quite consciously and responsibly (Urbex.bg, 2017), (Янева, 2016). These new communities still have a more urban identity. The people we asked, although oriented towards nature and having a clear and conscious desire for the natural, natural, pure and unadulterated (environment, food, human relations, etc.), are still more captive to romantic imagine the life of a village. Still, their motives for "fleeing the city", fatigue from a certain (typically urban) lifestyle, at this point, are a stronger factor in leaving the city than indicating long-term readiness to deal with the hardships of rural life. (Webstage, 2015).

In principle, IT villages have a high potential for development and only time will tell whether these new communities will survive or will disintegrate in the difficult life of the Bulgarian village. On the other hand, the

question remains open - if this type of village proves successful and their experience is multiplied, will it not radically change the face of the Bulgarian village? Will the centuries-old traditions, values, worldview survives and still - the main function of the Bulgarian village to provide food? Or will it proudly enter the 21st century in step with the high technologies of our information age?

We must also not forget the fact that the environment in which these new communities develop is traditional and not very inclined to accept the new and the unknown. Although in some cases we registered support for the newly formed communities and settlements, in other places they were met with distrust and skepticism by the local people. So, the fate of IT villages and similar newly formed communities in rural areas remains unclear, although the potential inherent in them is increasingly visible.

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