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## SPECIFICS OF RURAL AREAS OF SERBIA FROM THE ASPECTS OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>

*Marina Todorović<sup>2</sup>, Marija Drobnjaković<sup>3</sup>, Anja Gligić Simeunović<sup>4</sup>*

### Abstract

*The territory of Republic of Serbia is characterized by considerable socio-economic and demographic disproportions, which are result of inadequate legislations of regional development. Regional differences can be ascribed to the relations: north-south, Belgrade agglomeration – the rest of Serbia, centre-periphery, and specially dichotomy between village and city. The consequence of established regional structure led to the neglect of Serbian village, which is experiencing structural changes in spiritual, psychological and technological sphere. Serbian villages represent a traditional undeveloped area. This paper emphasis problems arising from historical neglect of the Serbian village, which primarily concern the rapid abandonment of agriculture and process of deagrarization, and continuing depopulation and demographic erosion of rural areas*

**Key words:** *regional disproportion, rural areas, depopulation, deagrarization*

### Introduction

The regional dimension of some particular area is determined by their socio-economic processes and their modifications, which are always the consequences of

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2 PhD Marina Todorovic, Faculty of Geography, Belgrade University, Studentski trg 3/3 Serbia miomare@eunet.rs ; 065/2224422

3 MSc Marija Drobnjaković, Geographical institute „Jovan Cvijić”, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, Serbia, Djure Jaksica, 9, Belgrade; m.drobnjakovic@gi.sanu.ac.rs, mob: 064/2658150

4 MSc Anja Gligić University of business studie Banja Luka, Faculty of business and financial studies Bijeljina. Miloša Crnjanskog 1, 76300 Bijeljina, Republika Srpska, BiH, тел. +387 55 213 352, E-mail: anjagligic@yahoo.com

the change of concrete conditions. They are carried out from the aspect of the space-development relation, in terms of territorialization of the regional development, with large problems and conflicts which are hard to solve. (Derić, Perišić, 1995). Performance of balanced regional development of Serbia disturbing so-called undeveloped / problem areas we face since the seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The number of municipalities that have classified into a category of problem areas has been changing over time, covering a wide range of up to 94 different municipalities (Tosic, Lukic, Cirkovic, 2009).

According to the last document, which in certain way treated the problems of the regional development and problematic areas, the draft of the new Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2010-2014-2021, 36 undeveloped local communities were singled out. During this long period, the most economically, demographically and socially endangered regions are so called traditionally undeveloped areas, which are mostly rural, hilly-mountainous and bordering regions, located in south and south-western part of Serbia.<sup>5</sup> This is an area with deep structural problems that were, in the transitional period, only deepening and now become almost impossible to solve. The problem lies in their “natural fragility, relative isolation and inaccessibility, traditional mono structure of economy”, continuing decrease of population and so called “demographical erosion”, the occurrence of spontaneously displaced rural settlements and continual increase of poverty of rural population. (Miletić, Todorović, Miljanović, 2009). All of these processes are the consequences of inadequate application of politics of regional development, which resulted in “population and economic super concentration” (the PPRS, 2010), on one hand, and “rural exodus and demographical erosion”, on other hand. This dimension of regional development is most obvious between centre-periphery and urban area with the neighbouring area-rural area. Thus, we can say that the main reason of the regional disparities is still unsurpassed rural-urban dichotomy.

### **The Problems of Rural Areas in Serbia**

Serbia has a long tradition in dealing with the problems of regional development, but the politics related to the rural areas and irregularities of territorial development have not been sufficiently coherent. The place and role of rural development in balanced regional development have long been unjustly neglected in economic theory and practice, and were outside the sphere of interest and consideration of complex issues in the regions and in regional development, which Stosic et al. (2008) see as the previously dominant theory of economic development. The current government in the past promoted to the village is a large Serbian potential, but practically nothing has been done to activate this potential and protection from further devastation. Bogdanov N. (2007) emphasizes that this dimension is marginalized and observed only as an accompanying part of other politics and development programs, which have always observed villages as a problem,

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5 Traditionally undeveloped areas, located on south of Serbia, are municipalities of Jablanica, Pčinj and Toplica districts and peripheral, bordering municipalities of Zlatibor and Raška districts.

never as a resource. Such attitude towards rural region of our country contributed to the marginalization of villages, stagnation and decrease of vitality of rural areas, which show “apparent concentration and spatial expressiveness of numerous problems” (Stamenković S., 1999), such as: strong depopulation lasting for decades and unfavourable mono-functional demographic structure, weakly developed and mainly mono-functional economy and infrastructure and superstructure supply which goes from considerably weaker to unfavourable. But, as the aforementioned author states, the problems are also: the decrease and decline of rural residential fund and the objects of rural economy and the decline of the scope and importance of rural economy. The aforementioned problems are practically “the brake of the development of rural settlements, the cause of stagnation in the development or, in certain situations, the consequence of complete extinction of rural settlements” (Stamenković S., Bačević, 1992).

About 85% of the territory of the Republic of Serbia is characterized as rural area; according to the OECD classification (population density is lower than 150 inhabitants /km<sup>2</sup>). There live about 55% of population of Serbia, and the average population density is 63 inhabitants/ha. According to this definition, 130 rural municipalities can be singled out on the territory of Serbia, or 3904 rural settlements (Bogdanov, 2007). If we observe statistic division on the territory of Serbia, without Kosovo and Matthias, 4715 settlements can be singled out; of which 4527 are rural (The Plan of Strategies for Rural Development, 2009).

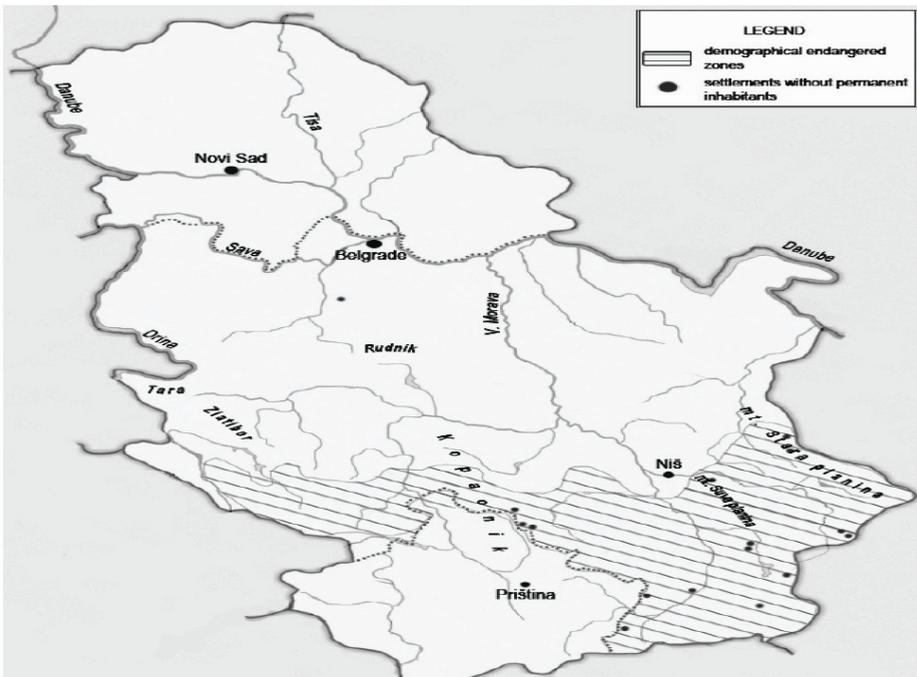
It has already been mentioned that a lot of rural settlements in Serbia, especially hilly-mountainous and those which are distant from local and regional centres, are mostly disposed to depopulation flows. For the last 50 years about 8 million people migrated from the villages, while that trend in the world lasted about 3 times longer. It caused their demographic discharge and fragmentation of a large number of settlements, causing “significant disproportions in the degree of socio-economic underdevelopment and the level of demographic demonstration of settlements in geo-space” (Stamenković, 2004). Depopulation is the basic demographic feature of numerous rural settlements in Serbia. Rural areas of Serbia received the characteristics of rural exodus even in the sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting from the eastern and south-eastern parts towards other parts of the country. In the period from 1971-1981, 77, 6% of settlements were seized by depopulation, in the following census period even 83 % of settlements. (Todorović, 2007). According to the Census of 2002 - 24, 6% of population lived in the so called middle-sized (with 2000-5000 inhabitants) settlements, or 65% of population lived in the settlements in the category between 500 and 5000 inhabitants. However, the biggest problem in the system of the settlement network of Serbia represent small and undersized settlements (less than 500, or 50 inhabitants), which are basic indicators of demographic risk for some parts of our country. In this group of settlements, with less than 500 inhabitants -7, 8% of population lived in 2002. The estimates are that the lowest number of small settlements are located in eastern, south-eastern and southern Serbia (about 700), which are also characterized as regions with development problems for which is predicted to be on the threshold of complete demographic discharge in the following one or two decades. Big problems particularly represent settlements with small number of inhabitants (less than 40 inhabitants) and extremely unfavourable demographic situation, which were faced

with constant decrease of population, primarily caused by emigration of the young, but also by increasing mortality rate in rural settlements. So, they are on the threshold of “withering away” or demographic “extinction”<sup>6</sup>. The trend of fragmentation of settlements will certainly continue in the future period.

The differences have already been noticed from the last conducted Census of 2002- since when the demographic picture of rural settlements of Serbia has considerably worsened. Milivojević, Milošević and Čalić (2008), using the field research, identified additional 16 “extinct “ villages, without any permanent inhabitants, and 19 more which have less than 10 inhabitants mostly older than the age of 60. The aforementioned authors have singled out three most endangered zones of demographic discharge: 1. along the administrative provincial border of Kosovo and Central Serbia; 2. the region of the mountain Stara planina and 3. Vlasina and Krajište (south and south-eastern Serbia).

However, with new researches in south-western part of Serbia, one more potential zone of demographically endangered regions was also identified which is of mountainous character as well. All the aforementioned zones represent regions with special development problems, identified in the PPRS (2010), or so called- traditionally undeveloped regions. This tells us about direct condition of late economic development and demographic discharge.

*Graph. 1 - Demographic affected areas*



<sup>6</sup> Numerous authors wrote on the extinction of individual settlements, among them: Stamenković S. (2004); Martinović M. (2004); Martinović M., Šantić D. (2006). Gabrovica – prilog Velojić V. (2000). Milivojević, M., Čalić, J., Milošević, M.V. (2007).

The second mentioned, important problems for the economic development of Serbian village are certainly the long-lasting institutional marginalization of agricultural production and the parallel process of deagrarianization. The process of deagrarianization in Serbia has been very intensive. The number of agricultural inhabitants has decreased to 3 million since 1953, and it culminated in the period of 1971-1981 when 1, 4 million of population left agriculture in only ten years. Almost two thirds of population was employed in the primary sector of activities in 1981 and in 2002 that number dropped to 38%. One of “the fastest exoduses in economic history” was registered here (Todorović M., 2007). The aforementioned socio-economic and political-social flows in our country led to the negative connotation and derogatory use of the term- peasant.

The following statistic data demonstrate, in interesting way, the current state of Serbian villages: every third village in Serbia has less than 200 inhabitants; every fourth village (26, 4%) has inhabitants older than the age of 50; even in 191 (4, 3%) villages there is no inhabitant younger than the age of 20; in last 30 years no baby has been born in 800 villages of Serbia; in the last twenty years 9 villages have disappeared from the territory of Serbia. (Todorović, 2007). There is also one interesting comparison of the deserted houses and emigrated population from the rural areas on the part of Stevanović Đ. (2008), who states that according to the Census of 2002 there were 46814 deserted houses in the villages and 144178 objects which were registered as temporary unsettled, which is about 192000 deserted objects. According to the average size of households- 770000 inhabitants were missing in rural areas.

Recent planning practice and institutional framework of Serbia left villages on the margin of the development, without appropriate instruments and support which would enable more dynamic economic and social development, better communal supply and more qualitative environment. Considering their significance for total and proportional territorial development of the country, it is necessary that reconstruction, improvement and organization of rural areas in a sustainable and socially rational way become one of the basic strategic priorities of Serbia. (PPRS, 2010).

## Conclusion

Village and peasantry in Serbia, depicted in such way, are overburdened with numerous problems which represent the obstacle for the development of the whole country. Hence, emergent and detailed measures need to be taken in order to remove and solve these problems, which “demand organized and pragmatic activity in numerous fields of political, social and economic life.” (Stamenković, Martinović, 2004). Reconstruction of rural society accompanied with the return to villages, demands more attractive, richer, versatile villages which need to be approached integrally from the complex rural development standpoint.

Many scientists have studied the issue of revitalization of rural areas. S. Agarwal, S. Rahman, A. Errington (2009) state that the key for successful economic transformation of rural areas lies in the accessible economic, human, cultural and environmental resources-capitals, which emphasize its multidimensional nature.

Considering this question, Serbia has for a long period lagged behind other countries of the EU and the countries in its close surroundings. Without institutional framework and appropriate strategy which would completely treat the problems of rural areas it was impossible to access certain funds for improvement of rural areas. It was only in the beginning of 2009 that the Ministry of Resources brought the Plan of Strategy for Rural Development for the period of 2009-2013, which has detailed analysis of the current limitations and potentials of Serbian village.

The economic development of rural areas should be based on the model of multifunctional agriculture and the introduction of additional activities, which will be the solution of employment outside agriculture in rural areas. Madureira and Costa (2010) notice that multifunctionality of agriculture has been acknowledged by scientists and politicians as "a promising approach to address sustainable development within rural areas". Van der Ploeg et al (2000) also think that the concrete rural development cannot be realized only through "expropriation of agriculture", but that it is necessary and the most important element in that conglomerate of rural activities. According to the authors, it is possible to realize its competition due to the fact that: agricultural households have access to the resources and they possess needed experience for reconfiguration of the old and opening of new activities; that in this sector is possible to develop new practices step by step, which considerably lessens the risk and enables the process of learning through practice.

As many authors state, alternatives of employment in agriculture, depending on characteristics of area, can be seen in activities connected to the agricultural production (food-processing industry, collecting forest products and healing herbs, production of healthy food and others), tourism (rural, ecotourism, hunting, fishing), recreation, handicrafts, handwork, trade, culture, other service activities and similar. But, it's important to notice that "in many countries partners of the OECD in relation at this character of multifunctionality the agriculture play a role much important for the life of rural regions" (Ciani, 2003)

Ten years long experience shows that transition is a period in which a country must interfere in those segments in which market did not give the expected results. Still, the process of eliminating regional differences is very hard and slow, and demands several-year-long engagement of all levels of government. However, apart from the decentralization and the adequate territorial organization of state on regions, as fields on which all development, institutional, management and financial activities will take place, it is necessary, in solving complex system of problems of undeveloped problematic regions of Serbia, to especially draw attention to detailed solving of the question of Serbian village and elimination of traditionally established dichotomy between village-town and differences conditioned with it. It is necessary to implement the rural population and economic development policy which will be based on appropriate economic, agricultural, demographic, regional and social policy, significantly different from the previous one.

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