

DERURALIZATION AS A GLOBAL PROCESS AND ITS TRENDS IN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

Deruralization is a process that began with the development of industry in today's developed Western world. The abandonment of villages in Serbia started between the two world wars, only to gain more intense momentum after the Second World War. In the first decades of the 21st century in Serbia, this process reached a critical point due to the large number of abandoned villages, the aging population in the villages and the decreasing workforce capable of performing tasks in rural areas. This paper analyses the movement of the rural population in the regions of Serbia and its municipalities. The census data were processed using descriptive statistics, and the data for the entire country by municipalities were presented using the cartographic method. Finally, the problems and possible consequences of such trends in the movement of rural population were dealt with. Possible ways of revitalizing rural areas were also emphasized.

Keywords: *deruralization, depopulation, global process, revitalization*

INTRODUCTION

People are in constant search for a better and easier life, as well as better paid jobs. The development of industry, the development of the tertiary and quaternary sectors, the better development of some regions in the whole world has contributed to the population migration from villages to cities, from less developed regions to more economically developed ones, as well as from less developed and developing countries to those that are economically stronger and well-developed. For these reasons, there has been a centuries-old migration of the population from rural to urban areas. Such flows have led to the concentration of the population in the cities, while the villages are left with significantly fewer inhabitants, and some even become deserted. What is it that drives a person to leave an environment where there is cleaner air, soil, water, where there is much more greenery, where they can produce food for themselves, i.e., where they are surrounded by a peaceful life in nature? People abandon such a life and settle in an environment characterized by noise, polluted air, traffic jams, significantly less greenery, surrounded by blocks of flats, concrete, busy people, and many more. There are various reasons that drive people to migrate to urban areas. Those factors differ from country to country, and vary from social, economic, demographic, cultural. People move because of unemployment or dissatisfaction with work, income, education, housing. Most of the migrants are attracted by the “lights of the big city”, which can be deceiving and at that moment a person does not see the advantages of the life they have left.

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The constant emigration of the population from rural areas has various consequences. The decrease in the number of inhabitants leads, in general, to a less favourable structure of the population, dominated by an older population, which is increasingly unable to engage in agriculture, an activity that mostly dominates rural areas. In the next phase, the older population leaves uncultivated land, abandons houses and properties, and moves to cities or dies in villages.

In the countries where industrial development started earlier, today there is generally a larger share of the urban population than in the countries with less developed industry. In the period from 1961, when there were about 2.02 billion rural population in the world until 2022, the number increased to 3.43 billion, which means that the rural population has increased by about 70%. On an annual basis in the rural areas of the world until 2021, there was an increase in the number of inhabitants, but from 2021 there was a decline in the absolute number of the rural population. Thus, in 2021, the world's rural population decreased by 0.08%, and in 2022, by 0.18%. On the other hand, the urban population increased in the period from 1961 to 2022, from 1.05 to 4.52 billion. In the observed period, the growth of the number of inhabitants in cities amounted to about 330%, which led to the fact that the share of the world's population in cities exceeded 50% in 2008 (Figure 1). By 2022, around 57% of the world's population lived in cities. Most countries in the world have a higher proportion of urban population. Only the countries of Central and Eastern Africa, as well as the countries of South Asia, have a dominant rural population. But even in those countries, an increase in the share of the urban population is evident. Among the countries with the least rural population according to the data of the World Bank are Belgium (only 2%), the Netherlands (7%), Iceland (6%), Jordan (8%), Japan (8%), Argentina (8%) and Gabon (9%) (Internet 1; Internet 2). There is no rural population in Gibraltar, Uganda and Bermuda. According to estimates, by 2030, the percentage of urban population in the world will reach 60%. This movement in the number and ratio of the urban and rural population leads to numerous serious problems, economic, social and political at the macro level, but it also has negative effects at the micro level.

Europe (27.1%) and South America (25.0%) are the continents with the least rural population in 2022, while North America (37.4%) and Asia (37.5%) had slightly more than a third of the total population in rural areas, while in Australia (51.0%) and Africa (52.0%) it is slightly more than a half.

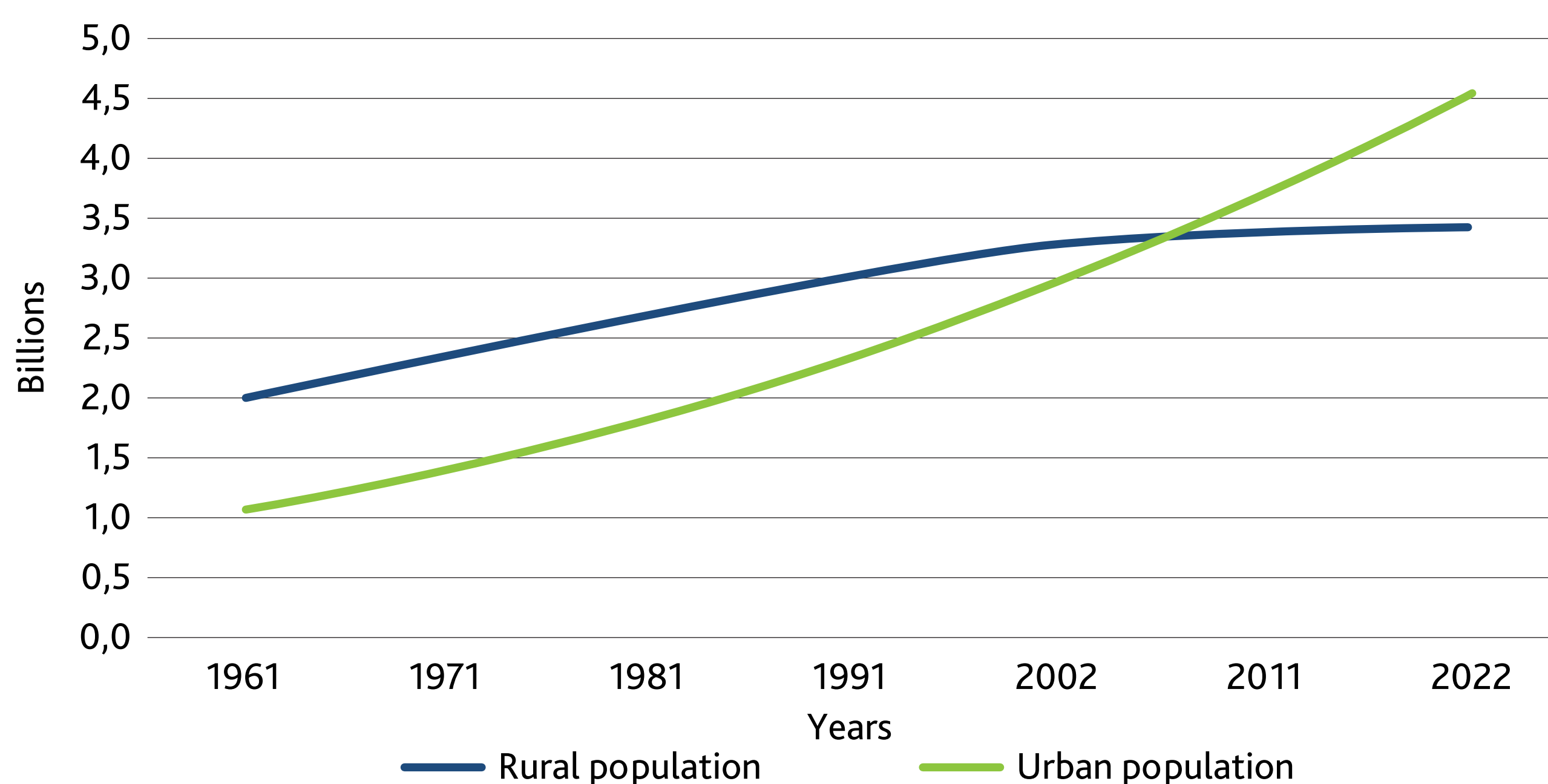


Figure 1. Rural and urban population in the world

Source: Internet 1; Internet 2

By 2050, according to estimates, a third of the world's population, around 33%, will live in villages (Simonič & Vorina, 2014). According to various scenarios by the Population Division of the United Nations, villages will be depopulated by 2121 (a projection based on the 2005-2030 trend), 2139 (a projection based on the 1950-2030 trend) or 2152 (a projection based on the 1950-2005 trend) (Kovács, 2009).

As can be seen from the attached data, the general trend throughout the world, the relocation of the population from rural areas to urban areas, marked the 20th century, and continued in the 21st century. There are numerous reasons for the exodus of the population from rural areas such as easier life, better earnings, the abundance of lifestyle advantages in cities, as well as other factors that contributed to the trend of leaving the countryside and are relevant to migration processes in significant parts of the world. This trend continues today, although the difference in lifestyle between the city and the countryside has decreased. Living in the countryside is dynamic, exposed to changes and has become a mixture of old traditions and new techniques (Šuvar, 2004). These migrations have decreased over time due to the reduced number of inhabitants in the villages, so migrations of different directions have become dominant.

RESEARCHED AREA

The paper investigates the trends in the number and share of the rural population in the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The territory of the Republic of Serbia is administratively and territorially divided into larger territorial units - provinces and regions. The autonomous provinces are Vojvodina and Kosovo and Metohija, and the regions are the Belgrade Region, the Vojvodina Region, the Šumadija and Western Serbia Region and the Southern and Eastern Serbia Region (NUTS 2). Serbia is also divided into smaller territorial units, which are municipalities, cities and the City of Belgrade. The smallest units are settlements (LAU 2) (Milosavljević, Jerinić, 2015), of which there are 6,158 in Serbia. In the territorial organization of Serbia, there are 197 local self-government units, of which 168 are municipalities, 28 cities and the City of Belgrade with special status (LAU 1). In this research, the analysis was done at the level of regions, municipalities and cities. The area of the Republic of Serbia without the area of AP Kosovo and Metohija was analysed. Due to the unavailability of data regarding the population, as well as the distribution of residents between urban and rural settlements in the territory of the AP Kosovo and Metohija, 29 municipalities that administratively belong to the southern province were not included in this analysis, so the research area covered 168 municipalities. The analysed area covers 77,589 km², which is 87.7% (SORS, 2023) of the total territory of the Republic of Serbia (88,499 km²).

DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

For the research on deruralization, the census data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 1948 to 2022 were used. Using descriptive statistics, the degree of ruralization and urbanization in Serbia, as well as its individual regions, municipalities and cities, was calculated. Data processing was carried out using the statistical method and using the administrative criterion of territorial organization, which is also used by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. All settlements, as the smallest territorial units, are divided into urban and “other”. Despite the fact that 28 municipalities have the status of a city, within them there are settlements that are urban, as well as settlements that are “other”. According to the Censuses in 2011, as well as in 2022, 193 settlements had the status of urban settlements in Serbia out of 6,158 settlements. According to the data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, those 193 settlements are urban areas, and the remaining settlements are qualified as “other”, so they belong to non-urban, i.e., rural areas. However, given that from these two Censuses, as well as in 2002, no data are available for the area of Kosovo and Metohija, this analysis comprised 4,709 settlements. According to the available data, and the Statistical Office division of areas, the data for Serbia includes 168 municipalities with 167 urban settlements and 4,542 “other” settlements (SORS, 2023, Gajić, Nikolić, Protić, 2021).

Descriptive statistics were used to process the data, which were then presented using a cartographic method or graphically for a better and easier comparison of the changes that occurred in the inter-census periods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Deruralization, as a global process, from countries with stronger industrial development, spread over time to developing countries. In Serbia, rural-urban migration, as the main cause of deruralization, gained momentum after the Second World War, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s (Bubalo-Živković et al., 2018; Ivano-
vić Barišić, 2015). Rural settlements near cities were transformed, the number of inhabitants in them was increasing, but the population that was employed in industry became dominant (Lutovac, 1975; Kojić, 1975), unlike previous decades, when they worked in agriculture. Economic factors have been the most influential factors for the process of deruralization in Serbia (Bandić, 1979). Employment opportunities, as well as steadier sources of income, attracted a large population from rural areas, but also from smaller areas to larger cities, where production facilities were concentrated. In addition to job hunting, the desire for higher education also drove the population from rural areas. Most often, young people, after completing their education, found work in cities, stayed in them, or went to even larger city centres or abroad.

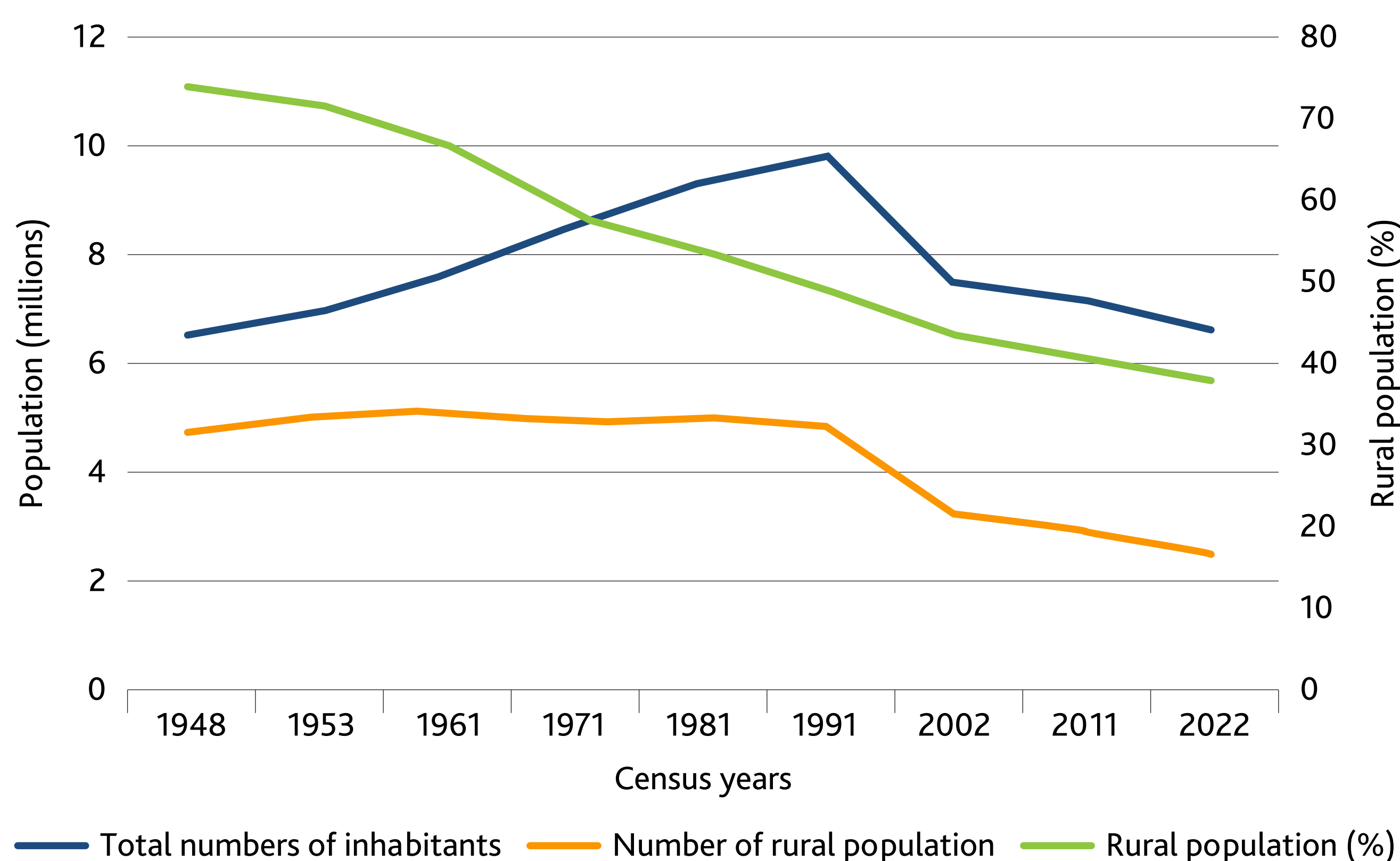


Figure 2. Rural population in the Republic of Serbia, in the period 1948-2022

The decline in the total number of inhabitants in Serbia, since the end of the 20th century, and especially during the 21st century, has led to a decrease in the number of inhabitants, both in rural areas and in urban settlements (Figure 2). In the period after the Second World War until 1961, the number of the total population in the Republic of Serbia increased by 17.1%, while the number of the rural population increased by only 5.3%. This means that immediately after the Second World War, there was a slight outflow of the population to the cities. In 1961, there was the highest absolute number of inhabitants in the villages, after that there was a slow and constant decrease in the number of inhabitants until the nineties, when the outflow of the population from the villages intensified. In 2002, the Census was not conducted in the area of AP Kosovo and Metohija, as well as in the following two Censuses, which resulted in the data showing a more intensive decrease, both in the total number of inhabitants in Serbia and in the number of the rural population. This leads to a conclusion that urban areas in Serbia are not the only destination for emigrants from rural areas, but also destinations abroad. The first decades of the 21st century have recorded both a decline in the total population in Serbia and intensive abandonment of villages. After the Second World War in 1948, Serbia had 73.7% of the rural population, and by 2022, the rural population decreased by half, and according to the last census, it comprised only 38.0%.

The Region of Vojvodina, an area that has all the geographical predispositions to be an agricultural area that can produce food for a much larger population than the whole of Serbia, has a problem due to the reduction of the rural population from 1948 to 2022 by one third (32.5%). After the Second World War, 60.0% of the population lived in the villages of Vojvodina, and in 2022, only 38.2% (Table 1). Since the 1960s, this region has seen constant emigration of residents from the villages. Emigration from villages is directed towards cities, mostly towards Novi Sad, but also abroad (Bubalo-Živković, Lukić & Đerčan, 2015). The population of all ethnic groups moved abroad, especially the Hungarians. According to estimates, from the 1990s to the middle of the second decade of the 20th century, about 50,000 inhabitants of Hungarian origin emigrated from Vojvodina (Gabrić-Molnár, 2011; Gabrić-Molnar & Slavić, 2014; Péti et al., 2021). The emigration of Slovaks to Slovakia was also recorded (Zlatanović & Marušik, 2024).

Table 1. The share of the rural population in the regions of Serbia, base and chain index

Years of Census	Vojvodina Region			Belgrade Region			Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia			Region of Eastern and Southern Serbia		
	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
1948	60.0	100	100	31.1	100	100	86.3	100	100	85.7	100	100
1953	58.8	101.5	101.5	28.8	107.0	107.0	83.9	104.1	104.1	83.7	102.5	102.5
1961	55.5	104.5	103.0	23.5	112.2	104.9	79.1	103.5	99.4	79.1	99.3	96.9
1971	49.9	99.0	94.7	18.1	111.2	99.1	70.9	97.6	94.3	70.2	90.7	91.3
1981	46.2	95.4	96.4	17.9	134.0	120.4	63.0	92.2	94.5	62.4	82.7	91.2
1991	44.6	91.2	95.6	18.2	147.9	110.4	58.2	86.1	93.3	56.6	73.5	88.9
2002	43.3	89.3	97.9	19.1	152.9	103.4	55.2	76.9	89.4	52.4	61.5	83.6
2011	40.6	79.7	89.3	19.0	159.7	104.4	52.6	69.6	90.5	47.8	50.0	81.3
2022	38.2	67.5	84.6	17.7	151.1	94.6	49.9	59.2	85.0	46.7	43.9	87.8

A - The share of the rural population in the total population of the region (in %), B - Base index, C - Chain index

Source: SORS, 2014; SORS, 2023b

The region of Šumadija and Western Serbia and the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia had over 85% of rural population after the Second World War. Even today, these are the regions with the most rural population, slightly less than half of the their total population, even though there has been a significant outflow of the population from the villages in those areas as well. About 40.8% of the rural population moved out of the Šumadija and Western Serbia Region, and even 56.1% from the Southern and Eastern Serbia Region. This emigration flow from the eastern and southern parts of Serbia led to some villages being deserted (Živanović et al., 2022; Cvijanović et al., 2021; Živanović et al., 2021).

Table 2. The average age of the total population, population in urban and rural settlements (2022)

	Total population	Population in urban settlements	Population in other settlements
Republic of Serbia	43.85	43.0	45.25
Belgrade Region	42.73	42.57	43.49
Vojvodina Region	43.64	43.17	44.39
Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia	44.31	43.0	45.63
Region of Eastern and Southern Serbia	44.86	43.53	46.38

Source: SORS, 2023a; SORS, 2023b

The emigration of the population from rural areas has resulted in economic, social and demographic problems. The lack of human capital in the villages has caused the lack of labour force, more uncultivated land, decrease in food production, which has led to economic dependence and increased import of food. The

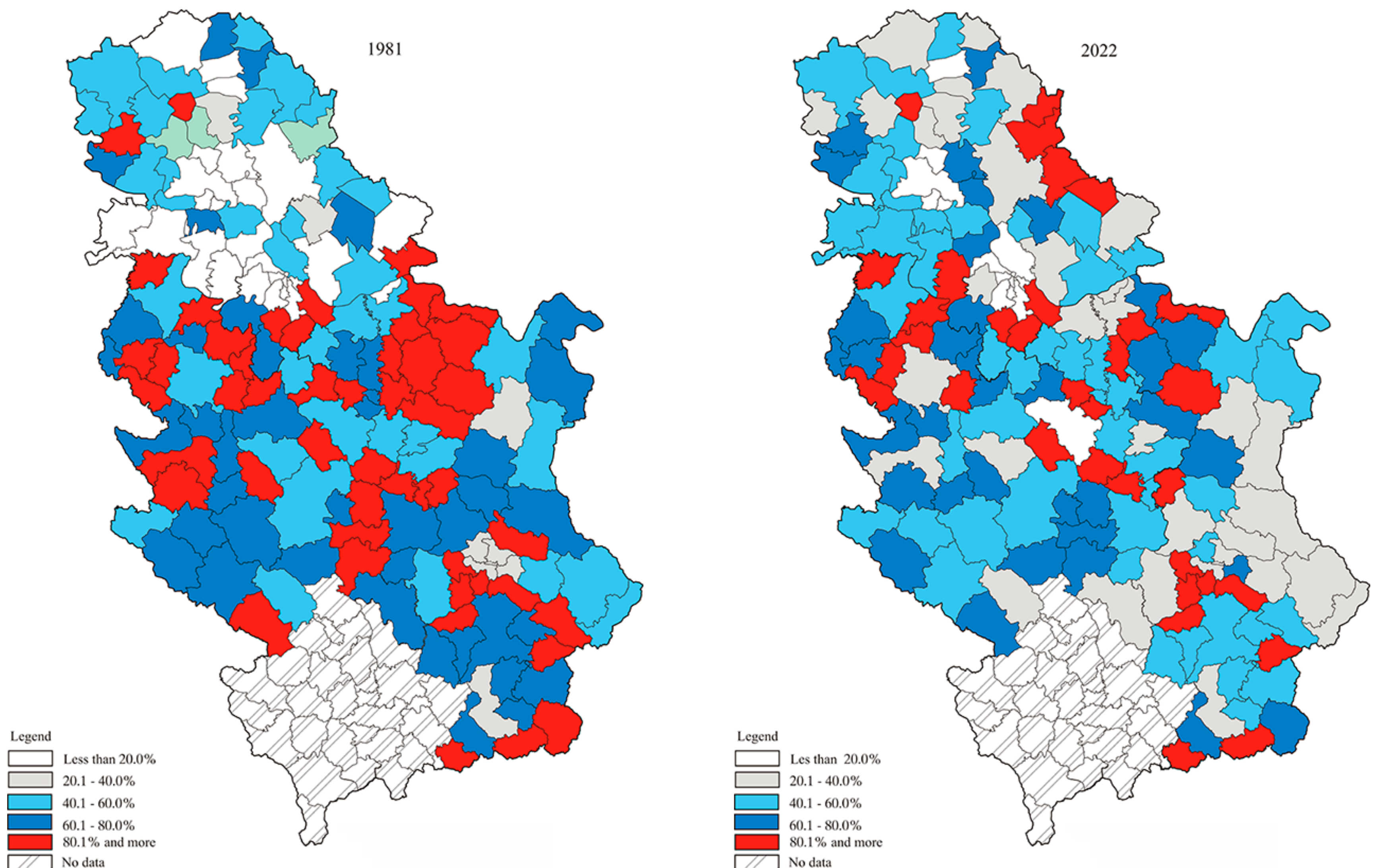


Figure 3. The share of rural population in the municipalities of the Republic of Serbia according to the results of the 1981 and 2022 Censuses

areas with poor human resources have ended up with economic stagnation, depopulation and environmental degradation (Sánchez-Zamora, Gallardo-Cobos & Ceña-Delgado, 2014). The elderly population is dominant in the villages. The average age is higher, which can be seen in Table 2. The oldest population in Serbia is in the rural areas of the Southern and Eastern Serbia Region, the region that had the largest population outflow from the countryside in the last seven decades.

The municipalities south of the Sava and the Danube, in the area of today's regions of Šumadija and Western Serbia and Southern and Eastern Serbia, decreased significantly, with the depopulation of rural areas in the period from 1981 to 2022 (Figure 3). The larger cities, Belgrade and Novi Sad, have been attracting migrants from smaller towns and villages with their facilities, so they have the smallest share of the agricultural population, both 40 years ago and today. The eastern parts of Serbia have been experiencing major changes and the greatest population devastation, not only in villages, but in almost all settlements in this part of Serbia. Conversely, there is an urban expansion of larger cities at the expense of agricultural land. Urban expansion, according to the results of the Census, is not accounted for by the population growth (Živanović, et al., 2022). The expansion of settlements because of industrial zones (Figure 4), the expansion of residential parts of the settlement (Figure 5), and the construction of traffic roads further worsen the situation in our rural areas. The repurposing of agricultural land is mostly done in flat areas, in river valleys, that is, in those areas where the soil is of good quality for agriculture, but also suitable terrain for the construction of various buildings. According to agricultural analysts, our country loses about 25,000 ha of fertile and arable land every year due to various construction works. There is about 20% less available land than just five years ago (Internet 3). This shows that deruralization is not only affected by the decrease in the number of inhabitants in villages, but also by the decrease in arable land at the expense of infrastructure or buildings for various purposes. The most common are industrial zones in the vicinity of larger cities, but there are examples where completely new industrial zones were formed in rural areas (Šimanovci). Agricultural areas were taken for the construction of



Figure 4. The expansion of industrial zones at the expense of agricultural land
Source: Author



Figure 5. The expansion of settlements on agricultural land

new roads. Although roads are needed for economic development, the development of various facilities and for connecting them, agricultural land is also necessary for survival. In that case, it is necessary to use poorer land more for the construction of roads, as well as industrial zones, and preserve good quality land for agricultural production.

The deruralization of Serbia led to a significant decrease in the share of the agricultural population. In the 1960s, about 63% of the active population was engaged in agriculture, while in 2022 that number dropped to 14.8%. In Vojvodina, the breadbasket of our country, only 4.4% of the total population is engaged in agricul-

ture. It is not much better in other regions, where the share of agricultural workers in the total active population is around 19.0%. The decrease in the number of the agricultural population, as well as the decrease in the area of arable land (Kljajić et al., 2012), leads to a decrease in food production.

In the last few decades, a reverse process, an “escape” from the “urban chaos” to the countryside, has been slightly on the rise in the world, and somewhat later in Serbia (Barcus, 2004). Urban-rural migrations are chosen by the residents who most often do online jobs. For the time being, these are individual cases when residents of the cities of the Republic of Serbia decide to move to the countryside from where they can engage in online business or agricultural production, but there are also the cases of returnees from abroad, most often after their retirement. Young people are also moving to rural areas to buy a house on the basis of a competition for the allocation of grants for the purchase of a country house with a garden in the territory of the Republic of Serbia (Internet 4). Rural development is one of the major contemporary problems of our country (Radovanović, 1999). Martinović and Ratkaj (2015), as well as Popović (2020), emphasize the importance of analyzing the relationship between the countryside and the city for achieving sustainability, but also for the diversification of the economy in the countryside, as well as the modernization of agricultural products. In order to “save” the villages in Serbia, changes in agrarian policy, the decentralization of the state, the revitalization of villages with sustainable development and modern agricultural production are needed. The modern concept of space use policy does not only include agricultural activity (Mardsen, Adriansen, 2004). Living in the countryside is possible, not only if one is engaged in agriculture. There are various activities that enable survival in the countryside and the survival of villages. Among the various possibilities for the development and survival of villages, rural tourism is the one most mentioned nowadays, as a particularly important component of tourism development, but also of villages and rural regions as a whole (Živković, et al., 2016). The Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia envisages more intensive development of rural tourism. The diversification of economic activities in rural areas predicts moving away from the primary sector (mainly agriculture), while the quality of life in the countryside will be encouraged and maintained within the framework of support for the reorganization and revitalization of the rural environment, including the preservation of cultural heritage and natural assets through various protection projects (Ćurčić et al., 2021). Today, along with demographic, socio-economic and infrastructural decline, rural areas in Serbia are affected by cultural degradation, including environmental neglect. Unplanned construction and destruction of the identity, aesthetic features and customs of villages, as well as arable land neglect, are accompanied by an irresponsible approach to the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, i.e., environmental protection.

CONCLUSION

The process of deruralization is a problem that can have major consequences both locally and globally. It can lead to the disappearance of traditions that are preserved mainly in rural areas, to the forgetting of customs, some characteristics of the language, as well as other ethnic characteristics that are preserved in rural areas. Cities are increasingly bearing the effects of globalization, which leads to forgetting and neglecting certain specificities of the population, and accepting new characteristics that take on global forms. Rural areas preserve old ways of food production or return to organic production. The development of technology enables greater agricultural production despite the decrease in agricultural population and agricultural employees. In Serbia, villages, especially in Eastern and Southern Serbia, remain abandoned, or with an old population that cannot engage in heavy agricultural work. The villages of Vojvodina are also dominated by the elderly population, even though it is an agricultural area with the most fertile soil in our country. Some countries of Western Europe have a significantly smaller share of the rural population, but due to developed mechanization and large estates, a small percentage of the rural population is not noticed. How to bring the population back to Serbian villages and revive them? How to restore people’s desire and need to produce food for themselves and others? Can we survive without our own production? In fact, the revitalization of villages through rural tour-

ism, organic production, safe placement of products and their price, are the hopes for the sustainability of the population in rural areas, and perhaps the return of the population to rural areas. Due to the fast life in cities, pollution, noise, being dependent on buying food, the production of genetically modified and artificial food, there is an aspiration of a certain number of inhabitants to return to life in the countryside.

It is necessary to take steps that will slow down the process of deruralization in our country. It is necessary to reduce the differences between rural and urban incomes, which can be one of the key steps in preventing the population outflow from rural areas. It is necessary to form better connections between these two environments, because neither rural environment can survive without the urban one, nor vice versa. In cities, the rural population has access to facilities such as health care, education, cultural facilities, everything that enables a better quality of life (Lalić, et al., 2024, Đerčan et al., 2022). If there is a good connection and easy access to urban facilities for the inhabitants of the villages, the rural areas will also become more attractive to the urban population, and they will not easily decide to emigrate.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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