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MODERN CHARACTERISTICS OF BULGARIAN BORDER TERRITORIES¹

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Abstract

Border areas are an important part of the national geographical area of each country. They have the state border, cross-border opportunities and connections with neighboring countries. Often, they are an element of national security, given the fact that they are the location of military bases and facilities. In this context, it is important to characterize them as part of the hierarchical structure of the national geographical space, the development of settlements, the population and the specific border economy in them. This material attempts to do exactly this. To enable highlighting important problems in the development of such "marginal" areas. Bulgarian border territories are all administrative municipalities with a direct border with our neighboring countries by land or river. These include maritime communities. In this topic, the border, sea and Danube regions are artificially divided. The Danubeones are essentially part of the border areas.

Keywords

Border territories – People – Economy – Problems

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Introduction

Geographical location of border municipalities

The border municipalities are those located along the state borders of the Republic of Bulgaria with the neighboring countries. According to the National Concept for Spatial Development, 43 municipalities with land borders are perceived as borderline in order to avoid duplication with the Danube and Black Sea. Most of the border municipalities along our western and southern borders can be classified as mountainous. I.e., there is some overlap between the categories of regions, and therefore similarities in their characteristics and problems. For this reason, in the "Purposeful investment program to support the development of Northwestern Bulgaria, the Rhodopes, Strandzha - Sakar, the border, mountain and semi-mountainous regions with low development" developed in 2015, these territories are in a common group. According to this document, only the municipalities from the Northeast are bordering with Romania are considered border regions.

We perceive as border ones all those municipalities that are in touch with the state borders with neighboring countries. We exclude the Danube and Black Sea ones from them, as they are analyzed separately and have different specialization and problems. Their total area is 20 thousand km² (18% of the country's territory).

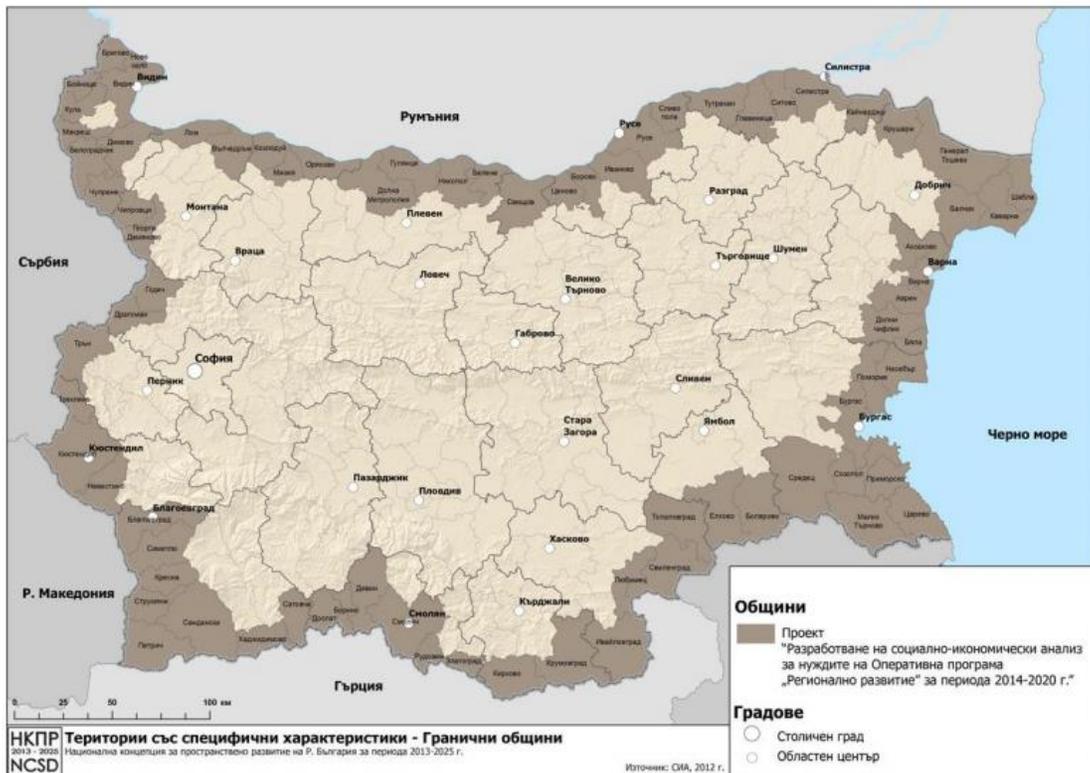


Fig. 1
 Map of the border regions in Bulgaria
 Source: National Spatial Development Concept 2013-2025

Data and methods

Demographic situation

A total of 630 thousand people live in all border municipalities (excluding the Danube and Black Sea ones)². This makes only 9% of the total population of the country. In these regions are also located 4 district cities (Kyustendil, Blagoevgrad, Smolyan and Silistra³). A total of 168,000 people live in these cities. This means that in these four cities, 27% of the total border population is concentrated. Other major cities are Petrich (\$ 27,000) and Sandanski (\$ 25,000). In fact, only 2/3 of the population of the border regions or 5% of the population of the country live in small towns and villages. This creates problems for the absorption of the territory, its development as a contact zone with the neighboring countries, and its depopulation is also a problem for the national security of the country.

In the indicated area of the border municipalities (regions) of 20 thousand km², 9% of the population of Bulgaria live. The average density is 31.5 p / km². This is twice less than the national average.

The demographic indicators for border municipalities are heterogeneous depending on their geographical location (Table 1). The territories selected differ in both area and population. Both southern border territories and western and northeastern border regions of the country have been selected. The general similarity is that in all of them the average density is below the national average. It also has variations, but municipalities in the far northwest and border northeast territories have the worst performance. In practice, in these municipalities the average population density is below the national average and one of the lowest in the country (Kula municipality 12.5 p / km², Gen. Toshevo - 13.3 p / km², etc.). On the other hand, some border regions, especially along our southern border, with better demographics are emerging. The municipalities of Sandanski, Kirkovo, Smolyan have an average density close to the average for the whole border region.

Natural movement has deteriorated throughout the region. The most negative values are found in the northwestern and northeastern municipalities. The municipalities of Bregovo and Kula (in other topics there were similar examples for Shabla municipality, etc.) have values of negative natural growth more than 4 times less than the average values for Bulgaria (Kula municipality: -29.6 ‰). On the other "pole" are the Rhodope border municipalities, where the values of the indicator are close to those of the country, and the municipality of Kirkovo is even "better". The reason is the specific ethno-religious character of the population in these municipalities.

municipality	area / km ² /	population /number/	average density /p/km ² /	natural growth /‰/	population in elderly age (%)
	1	2	3	4	5
Elhovo	702	14234	20.3	-10.3	29.9
Kirkovo	538	21254	39.5	-5.5	27.3
Smolyan	854	36475	42.7	-8.6	28.3
Sandanski	998	37400	37.8	-7.4	26.0
Simitli	553	13249	24.0	-10.5	24.5

² Population by current address as of December, 2019 according to civil registry office system data.

³ Silistra District has a small river border with the Danube River for about 20 km.

Kula	292	3654	12.5	-29.6	41.3
Bregovo	179	4498	25.1	-24.2	40.0
General Toshevo	982	13063	13.3	-15.0	31.2
Kaynardzha	315	5076	16.1	-0.4	15.3

Table 1

Demographic indicators for selected border municipalities (2018)

Source: columns 1 и 2 – NSI; columns 3, 4 и 5 – authors' calculations

An intermediate group of the analyzed indicators is formed by the border municipalities along the Struma River and the Western fringe mountains (e.g. Simitli Municipality: -10.5 ‰ natural growth and 24 p/km² average density).

Regarding age, there are again differences in the different border municipalities. The worst indicators are for the northwest border regions with over 40% of people at elderly age. The aging population is a leading problem there. Population at working age is only 10% (Kula municipality). This fact puts the settlements at risk from extinction (combined with emigration) only in the next 20 years. The remaining municipalities have a deteriorated age dependency, but within the national average (24.5%), and the municipalities of General Toshevo, Elhovo, Smolyan have comparatively worse indicators.

Economic profile

In the past, border territories were the location of military bases (especially along the Bulgarian-Turkish and Bulgarian-Greek state borders). Employment was related to the engagement of the free female labor force. For this reason, even after 1990, the leading industrial enterprises were those of the tailoring industry.

Today, the leading employment sector is the primary one, with employment mainly in the agricultural sector. In agriculture, most often, arable land is low in quality, falls in a mountainous area for which agro-climatic and soil conditions imply the cultivation of a limited number of crops. For example, for the Rhodope border municipalities the leading ones are industrial crops (mainly tobacco) - 28% and potatoes - 16%.

In the Strandzha - Sakar region, mainly cereals are grown, accounting for over 50% of the arable land in the four border municipalities with agricultural character. In recent years, the share of industrial crops (sunflower, rapeseed, coriander (Bolyarovo) has increased). In the border municipalities along the Bulgarian-Romanian land border, cereals with some of the most fertile soils in the country predominate.

Due to lack of manpower, animal husbandry is mostly a family business. It is the leading sector in the municipality of Tran.

In the primary sector, mining predominates in some municipalities. E.g. Zlatograd with lead-zinc ores near Erma River; Toplovgrad with extraction of dolomites, feldspars and marble; Simitli with extraction of brown coal (60% of the employed).

In mountainous border municipalities, the timber industry is next in importance. In the municipalities of Malko Turnovo, Elhovo, Dospat it is one of the leading ones.

The secondary sector is represented by the clothing and food industry (Petrich, Sandanski, Ivaylovgrad). In large regional centers, the industrial profile is more diverse.

An alternative is tourism, which has traditions in some of the municipalities (Smolyan, Zlatograd, Sandanski, Kyustendil).

Problems

The peripheral location of these regions has predetermined their isolation from the more dynamic processes of development in the interior of the country. They are characterized by poor transport accessibility, underdeveloped public services, and an insufficient number of border crossing points. They have a severely deteriorated demographic situation and levels of health and educational access. The profile of the economy is in the extractive sector, which is not a feature of our national economy.

Danube border area. Geographic coverage, demographics, and economic profile

The area covers all municipalities in Bulgaria with a real access to the Danube River. They are 23, being part of seven administrative districts. These are the districts: Vidin, Montana, Vratsa, Plevna, Veliko Turnovo, Ruse and Silistra. Of all the studied municipalities, only Vidin, Ruse and Silistra are district centers and simultaneously centers of municipalities with access to the Danube. The Association of Danube Municipalities in Bulgaria ("Danube"), which includes 36 municipalities, functions as a legal entity. 13 without access to the Danube. Of all 23 municipalities, the municipality of Mizia has the the smallest access to the river, only 2 km.

The area occupied by the Danube municipalities is 8 thousand km². This is 7.2% of the country's area. The total population of the area is 523,000. This is only 7.5% of the population of Bulgaria. The average density is 65 p/m². It is within normal values for the country but is twice as high as the other border regions.



The second bridge over the Danube at Vidin (New Europe Bridge, opened in 2013)

In the last 10 years, the population of the Danube municipalities has decreased by almost 25%, which is twice as fast as the national average (www.economic.bg). The only municipality where the negative demographic trends are less pronounced is Ruse, where the population decline is 11%. Other district centers such as Vidin and Silistra have lost about 35% of their population since 1990, and in smaller municipalities such as Bregovo and Nikopol, the decline has been nearly 50% since the beginning of the 20th century. For

2018, the negative natural growth even for leading municipalities such as Ruse is above the national average (-7.1 ‰ for 2018), and for Vidin this value is above 10 ‰. The values of smaller municipalities (eg Gulyantsi: -21.5 ‰) and rural municipalities such as Novo selo (-42 ‰!) are very negative. Negative but lower than the national average are the demographic indicators for the natural increase of Kozloduy municipality (-5.6 ‰).

In addition to the negative natural growth, there are also negative migration trends in the Danube municipalities, with losing an average of over 1000 people annually (NSI) over the last few years. Most of the municipalities have negative mechanical growth and in the municipality of Ruse it is only -1.6 ‰. In 2018, 250 residents moved out, mostly from the smaller settlements of the municipality. The municipalities of Novo selo and Gulyantsi are the only ones with positive mechanical growth, but it is only a few dozen settled. Population decrease through negative mechanical growth has a smaller proportion than natural movement.

Today, almost 42% of the population of the Danube municipalities live in the regional cities of Rouse, Vidin and Silistra. Only 27% of the population of the region are concentrated in the city of Ruse. This shows its extremely uneven distribution.

Specializing industries in the region are nuclear power (Kozloduy) and inorganic chemistry (Ruse) and, to a lesser extent, brewing (Lom). Following the closure of the Kremikovtzi Metallurgical Plant, the development of Lom as a leading river port center has greatly diminished. Emblematic enterprises in the past, such as tires (Vidin), batteries (Nikopol) and sugar (Lom), are not in operation. Kozloduy municipality is the leader in terms of wages, and in unemployment rates - Ruse (3% at the beginning of 2020).

Sea border municipalities

Bulgaria has an eastern boundary entirely bordering the sea basin. For 378 km, it washes its shores from the Black Sea. As an inland continental sea, it places considerable restrictions on transport openness to the rest of the world and in the specialization of export-oriented industries from the national economy. This also determines the smaller extent of the Bulgarian coastal zone. It is a strip comprising 200 m from the Black Sea and extending up to 60 km inland. Administratively, it covers 33 municipalities with more than 1.5 million inhabitants (Penerliev, 2012). Of the total population of Bulgaria, which is 7 million people, this represents 21% of it. This is in line with other countries, which in a strip of up to 50 km have a similar share of their "marine" population. As with other similar areas, it has its intrinsic regional differences.

The intra-territorial differences in the coastal zone are significant. Only the municipalities which have the big cities of Varna and Burgas as their centers have an indicator below the national average.

On the other "pole" are the municipalities of Byala and Shabla, which have a very worsened natural demographic growth (-22 ‰ for Shabla municipality!). Even the municipalities of Tsarevo and Kavarna have indicators above the national average (Table 2).

Municipality	Natural growth ‰
Varna	-2.1
Burgas	-3.1
Primorsko	-6.5
Tsarevo	-8.7
Kavarna	-8.6
Byala	-12.5
Shabla	-22.0

Table 2
Natural demographic growth in selected municipalities in the coastal zone (2018)
Source: NSI

Mechanical movement shows that intra-territorial differences are smaller than natural population movements. Only 2 municipalities with direct access to the Black Sea have extremely negative characteristics. These are the municipalities of Shabla and Tsarevo, which are borderline, peripheral to the large industrial centers. The emigration of the population from them is mostly related to the inability to commute, combined with a negative natural demographic growth. The municipalities bordering directly Varna and Burgas have a significantly lower rate of population decline.

The general economic profile of the coastal zone is related to the preferential development of the so-called "maritime industries": tourism, shipbuilding, maritime transport, the chemical industry.

Tourism is the "emblem" of the coastal zone. Seaside tourism is leading in the country, with over 70% of the entire accommodation base located there. One of our largest resorts – Sunny Beach, Golden Sands, Albena, are seaside ones. According to the Ministry of Tourism, on average, 5 to 5.5 million are sea tourists on an average year in Bulgaria. Their territorial distribution is 60% on the Southern Black Sea and 40% on the Northern. The largest number of foreign tourists on holiday in the coastal zone were those from Romania (698 thousand) and Germany (670 thousand) and Greece (465 thousand).⁴

Conclusion

The analyzed border territories show a clear demographic backwardness compared to the rest of the country. In some border municipalities, the negative growth rates are much worse. The population is unevenly distributed and their social status is poor. The maritime territories, as in the rest of the world, are attractive to the population, given the better standard of living and the opportunities for professional realization. However, their peripheral areas are also lagging behind and economically underdeveloped.

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