

# THE POPULATION CONUNDRUMS AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN SERBIA

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*Population development may reveal either a potential or constraint on functional labour markets and spatial development of the territory in concern. The first results of the 2011 Census in Serbia depict a rather bleak demographic situation, which is only the continuation of population trends from the late 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, substantially fuelled by dynamic political and socioeconomic processes featuring Serbia in the past few decades. The focus is on demographic changes in relation to three correlated aspects: 1) intensive ageing process; 2) depopulation and negative natural growth; and 3) migratory movements - population exodus. This paper addresses in particular the spatial consequences and institutional aspects of recent demographic changes and their reflection on urban areas in Serbia. In the past, population movements from rural to urban areas used to colour much of the migratory balance map of the country, however this situation changed due to exhaustion of the 'traditional' demographic reservoirs. Still, urban primacy of the capital city Belgrade has been even intensified with the recent demographic movements, or more precisely, a tissue of the two largest cities in relative proximity - Belgrade and Novi Sad is hypertrophied in a demographic sense. Other urban settlements in Serbia, especially the smaller towns, which are numerous but demographically shrinking, have not been empowered enough to substantiate better links with smaller and larger settlements within urban-rural interface, and their role has been challenged in that respect. Demographic changes, which affect urban growth or decline, are largely to do with border effects, economic and social gaps, educational opportunities, and search of certain 'urban lifestyles'. The latter is particularly stressed regarding the process of 'second demographic transition' which encompassed Serbia and is manifested by changes in the family domain, viz. partnership and parenthood, as well as by plurality of lifestyles, namely for the younger and middle-age generations (20-34 years – dominantly the people in reproductive age) who are able to exercise their residential choices towards bigger urban centres. Finally, this paper addresses the demographic determinants of languishing population growth in Serbia coupled with highly uneven territorial distributions of population and level of development, which in the last decade marks the ratio of 10:1 (measured by GDP/inh.) between the most developed and the least developed regions in Serbia.*

**Key words:** population, dynamics, urban settlements, Serbia.

## INTRODUCTION

The demographic structure of a territory is shaped by the number of births and deaths, population ageing and the balance of inward- and outward- migration. There is a vast literature on the components of population increase and frequently emphasised phenomenon of overpopulation. On the other hand, the issue of population decline reaches a new research momentum, being shaped by

external factors, e.g. political and economic conditions, as well as by the internal factors such as fertility decrease due to changes in lifestyles, cultures and aspirations. Serbian population decline may serve as an illustrative example, since this is a post-socialist society where the process of transition started much later than in other former communist countries of Europe, and has faced prolonged economic and political crisis which stimulates continuous out-migrations of its population. At the same time, those who remained in Serbia, especially the generation of age 20-34, follow the pace with the wider European trend of

'second demographic transition', viz. nuptial/partnership settings, postponed parenthood, and drop in fertility rates (subreplacement fertility). As a consequence of reduced job prospects, low level of individual's self-achievement, and high dominance of subsistence human needs, the majority of population in Serbia is mainly oriented towards day-to-day decision-making instead of long-

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term planning, which creates big repercussions in all aspects of personal and societal functioning. All that calls for a renewal of strategic research, thinking and governance at the national level, which should address a selected number of key demographic issues and their spatial/territorial implications.

Starting from the 1980s, a number of researchers dedicated their work to population decrease in the developed countries. Serbia had begun experiencing the matching demographic trends as from the 1990s, i.e. slightly postponed in comparison to the rest of Europe. However, not all parts of the country have been affected by the population decline, e.g. metropolitan region of the capital city Belgrade acted as a 'gainer' in this process because it managed to retain the proper population and to attract the newcomers. The explanation of this tendency lies in the fact that Serbia had strong centralisation and that, as in the rest of the world, the urban process has been fundamentally a political-economic one (Wu, 2003; Vujošević and Nedović-Budić, 2006).

An overall degree of urbanisation and the degree of urban concentration are the two related issues. Former is dominated by three factors: population growth, rural-urban migration, and subsequent urban expansion. Urban primacy or high concentration of urban population of a country in a single large city features a number of developing countries and Serbia is no exception to that 'rule'. However, in order to set the particular local experience into a broader context, one should try to make sense of 'distinctive combination of expansionary growth (or population decline) and urban social and spatial restructuring' (Soja *et al.*, 1983:196).

The research question addressed in this paper is which urban settlements in Serbia<sup>2</sup> are still gaining and which ones are losing the population and how this reflects on territorial distribution of population in the country. The opening discussion is dedicated to some historical points of urbanisation in Serbia which brought to the present demographic conditions, as well as to the analysis of demographic drivers and pressures in urban as well as in rural settlements of the country. This is followed by the discussion of development context for urban settlements of Serbia. The conclusions are drawn towards the need for renewed strategic research and thinking in

<sup>2</sup> In the sequel, when referring to Serbia, it is actually meant the encompass of Central Serbia and Vojvodina because the accurate data for the analysis have not been available for the territory of Kosovo and Metohija (southern province of the Republic of Serbia).

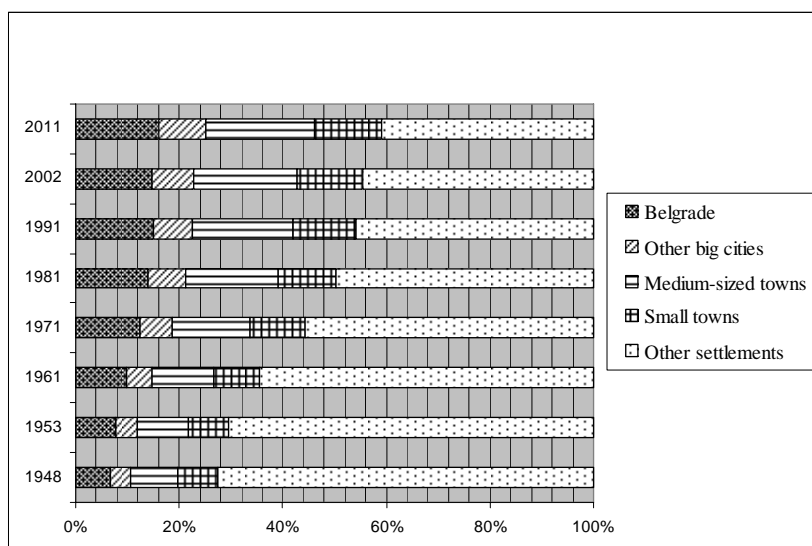


Figure 1. Population growth/decline according to different settlement types of Central Serbia and Vojvodina in the period 1948-2011

respect to sound demographic and urban/regional policy.

## POPULATION CHANGES IN URBAN AND RURAL SETTLEMENTS OF SERBIA

### An overview of the urbanisation process in Serbia after the Second World War

Before focusing on the present demographic conditions in urban settlements of Serbia, it is necessary to go back in the past, i.e. to the period when a dynamic primary urbanisation process took part. This was the phase of intensive industrialisation after the Second World War (in the 1950s and 1960s) which was marked by fundamental structural changes and long-term consequences that reflected on the country's population (re)distribution. According to the 1948 Census, the Republic of Serbia (without Kosovo and Metohija) was home to 5.8 million people, out of which 73% lived in rural settlements (see: Figure 1). In many respects, subsequent urban development of the country paralleled that of other areas of the formerly traditional world (Spasić, Petrić, 2007). With acceleration of the industrial process, towns which were to take the role of future industrial hubs became the focal points for development and concentration of people and activities. They mushroomed 'swollen by the influx of countrymen who have abandoned their herds and fields, motivated by the familiar push and pull stimuli so frequently described in the literature of urbanisation' (Simić, 1974). The main motivation behind such tendency is people's natural craving for moving upwardly

in search of a better quality of living. As in other countries of real-socialism, the state was also the main subject of urbanisation in the former Yugoslavia including the Republic of Serbia, which was its integral part. Urban settlements, especially the republic and federal centre - Belgrade had been the focus for all investments being directed to industry, infrastructure and public service provision. This induced formation of two poles of development: (a) territorially small but demographically and economically expanding areas, typically being urban hubs in the zones under influence of the main development axes, among which the (Sava) Dunav-Morava development axis dominates the Serbian territory; and (b) territorially large areas, yet shrinking in population and economic terms, dominantly in rural, remote and/or in mountain regions (Stojanović, Vojković, 2005). What is the particularity of this process is that it keeps its pace even in the periods of the first and second demographic transition (characterised by decrease in natural population growth as well as by significant aging process and (post)modern turn in the family domain accompanied with the pluralisation of lifestyles especially for the younger and middle-aged generations) (Bobić, Vukelić, 2011).

A sudden urban population growth of the country, which was due to the process of primary urbanisation, had the effects throughout the period 1953-1981 when the urban population of Central Serbia and Vojvodina nearly tripled in numbers (Stojanović, 1990). However, the process of *demographic transition* in Serbia already

formed its roots by the 1960s, and has subsequently grown with the effects of 'spontaneity' (Stojanović, Vojković, 2005; Krnić, Tošić, 2007). Demographic transition as a universal phenomenon which is shaped by 'the overriding importance of mortality decline and the impact of the modernisation process in people's lives' (Notestein, 1945 in: van de Kaa, 2002:1) has overshadowed the effects of the primary urbanisation in Serbia in the 1990s, i.e. when the traditional demographic "reservoirs" (dominantly rural areas) showed first signs of "exhaustion" (Stojanović, Vojković, 2005). Urban population of Serbia kept growing in the period 1981-1991, but its stagnation followed in the next two intercensus periods, i.e. 1991-2002 and 2002-2011 (see: Figure 2). On the other hand, because of much greater decrease of the total population in Serbia, the level of urbanisation in the country has grown to 59% in 2011, which is still relatively modest in comparison to the European average of 73% urban dwellers in 2011 (UN, 2012:9).

### Present demographic conditions in Serbia

The dominant demographic trends in present Serbia demonstrate that its population is being 'shrinking', while the growing number of villages and towns have become 'ghosts' or they appear 'too big' for their present population quantum. General analyses of statistical data from the latest (2011) Census in Serbia - First results (SORS, 2011) clearly demonstrate that the country's population is in a downward spiral of negative natural growth, encompassed by a significant ageing and continued emigration of people to other countries, with a resultant of 377,335 people less (decline of over 5%) now in Central Serbia and Vojvodina than it was recorded by the previous (2002) Census for the territory in concern. In the period 2002-2011, out of 4 regions in Serbia (not including its Region of Kosovo and Metohija for which the data have not been available), it is only the City of Belgrade Region that had an increase of population (approx. 63,000 inhabitants, or 4% growth). At the same time, population of the Region of Vojvodina and of the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia decreased for more than 5%, respectively, and the population of the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia had demographic loss of more than 11%! In the last intercensus period, out of 168 municipalities in Central Serbia and Vojvodina, it was only 22 that had an increase of population (see: Figure 3). Among those 22 municipalities, 11 belong to Belgrade Region

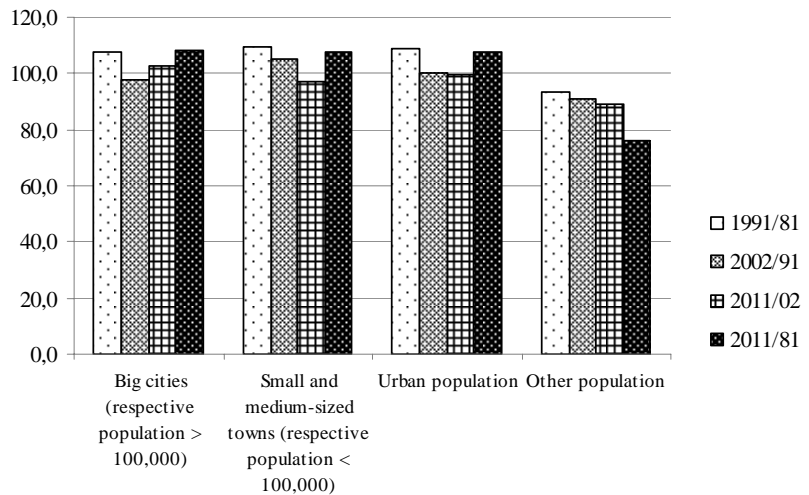


Figure 2. Population change index according to different groups of urban settlements and for urban and other population in Serbia within the period 1981-2011

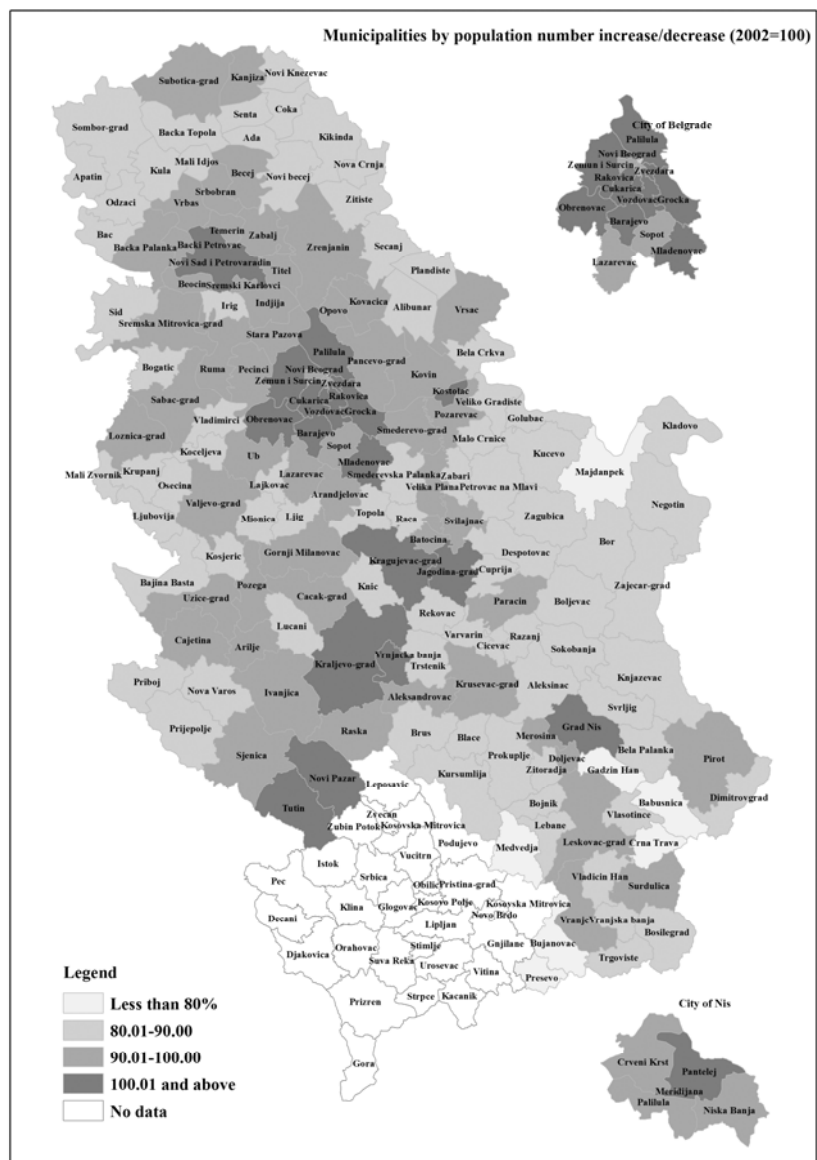


Figure 3. Municipalities in Serbia by population increase/decrease (change rate)(2002=100) Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2011) 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia – First Results

(Barajevo, Voždovac, Grocka, Zvezdara, Zemun, Mladenovac, Obrenovac, Palilula, Rakovica, Surčin, and Čukarica), and the rest are: Novi Sad, Petrovaradin (which both constitute the City of Novi Sad), Jagodina, Vrnjačka Banja, Kraljevo, Novi Pazar, Tutin, Kragujevac, Kostolac, Niš-Medijana, and Niš-Pantelej (latter two are integral parts of the City of Niš).

As it can be observed from Figure 4, out of present 169 urban settlements in Serbia (without data for Kosovo and Metohija), Belgrade is the only city with more than one million inhabitants (1,137,513 inh. or 16% of the total population in Central Serbia and Vojvodina together in 2011). Novi Sad is the second largest city of the country (221,854 inh., or another 3% of Central Serbia and Vojvodina population in 2011), whereas other big cities of the country - Niš and Kragujevac, have less than 200,000 people respectively (SORS, 2011).

When focusing on the urban population dynamics by city size classes in Serbia in the period 2002-2011, the group of small and medium-sized towns as former gainers of population are now depopulating, while big cities have been growing (see: Figure 5). This, however, is not surprising since the larger cities worldwide demonstrate a stronger position in terms of competitiveness and agglomeration advantages, therefore leaving small and medium-sized towns behind both in terms of economy and population capacities. It is just that Serbia experienced this process with a slight time-shift as a consequence of later initiation of the post-socialist transition.

The complexity of demographic issues in Serbia in the period 2002-2011 has been profound, with special concern for its 'geostrategic ('territorial') dimension' (Vujošević *et al.*, 2010:72). Since there have been no indication of a radical shift in depopulation trends which are shaped by negative natural population growth and emigration of the most vital part of the population, Serbia presently 'loses' in average 42,000 people/year (which equals the total population of a medium-sized town in the country!), and that is noticeably higher than in the previous intercensus period (1991-2002) when the average loss was around 30,000 people/year. The worsening of the population age structure is the predictable outcome of such tendencies, but what particularly strikes is that for countries like Serbia in which 'long-term strategies typically have the horizon until the next elections' emigration may be considered as a 'safety net' for the issues of unemployment and state budget because each emigrant is 'one person less at the bureau for the unemployed' as

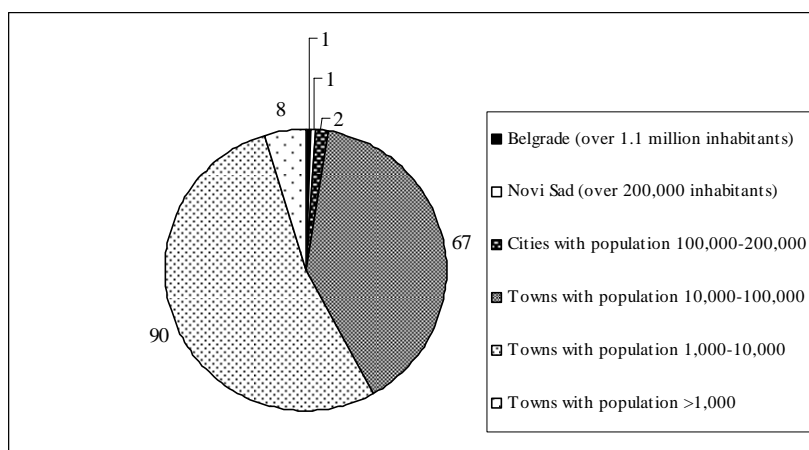


Figure 4. The share of various categories of urban settlements by their population size in Central Serbia and Vojvodina in 2011 (according to SORS, 2011)

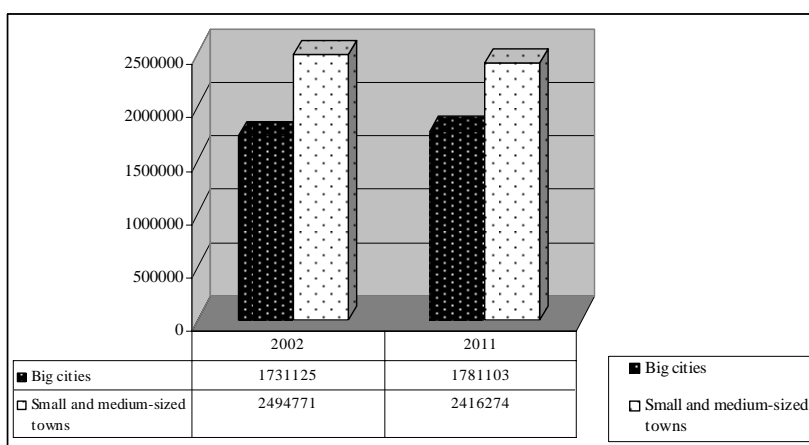


Figure 5. Distribution of population in big cities and small and medium-sized towns in Serbia in the period 2002-2011

well as that 'emigrants bring back in Serbia each year two to three times more money than the country obtains through foreign direct investments and incomes deriving from the privatisation of the state property' (see: Katić, 2009 in Vujošević *et al.*, 2010:173). Consequently, since emigrants also pull their children away from the country and leave parents (senior citizens) behind, the share of retired people grows in relation to the remaining working force in the country, representing a threat for the maintenance of pension funds and social services quality. The experience of other countries which started earlier with the process of post-socialist transition and joined the EU demonstrated that under such circumstances these countries' work force emigration (seasonal and the long-standing one) was enhanced, and such situation may also be experienced by Serbia should it join the EU. With that in view, the much craved for population and work-force renewal in Serbia 'after the year 2017, when the country should become an immigration destination' (Sekulić, 2005, quoted in: Nikitović,

2010:100) induces the new challenges of accepting a potential immigration from Asia, North Africa as well as from Kosovo, which altogether may not be very welcomed by the domicile population.

### Demographic drivers and pressures in Serbia

As it has been previously pointed out, the overall demographic retrogression featuring Serbia is one of the key factors which put rather 'bleak tones' on its development prospects (Vujošević, 2007). One should particularly stress on significant population ageing, i.e. high share of people of advanced age in the country, which lists Serbia in the group of the **fastest ageing populations in the World**<sup>3</sup>. According to the average age of

<sup>3</sup> This does not apply to the part of its territory (Kosovo and Metohija), in which Albanian ethnic group forms a majority that is characterized by much younger population and population expansion by natural growth, contrary to demographic trends at the rest of the territory of Serbia (Spasić *et al.*, 2009).

population in the Republic of Serbia (42.2 years) (SORS, 2012a), the country is listed among the 20 'oldest' in the World (Wikipedia, 2012). Truly, in contrast to numerous unpredictable trends, global ageing of population is highly foreseeable and distinctive trait during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This process occurs in a range of settings, both among wealthy nations and within transitioning societies, being caused by intertwined factors – declining fertility and longer life expectancy, latter being ascribed to the achievements of public health, education and economic development. Although the ageing population represents a general impediment to development and institutional reforms, in order to break the stereotypes which picture this phenomenon as bad, societies should capture the full benefits that occur out of it – opportunity to involve older people in making substantial contributions for much longer periods than it was the case in the past, and this doesn't reflect only on senior citizens performing agricultural activity (Pantić, Živanović Miljković, 2010). Serbia, however has still been 'wrestling' with pressing issues of socio-economic nature (highly uneven territorial distribution of population and of the development level – i.e. ratio 10:1 between the most and least developed regions, where imbalances demonstrate further tendency of growth) (see: Maričić, Petrić, 2008, Vujošević *et al.*, 2012), and in many ways the country fails to adapt and unlock the potentials of the large front of senior citizens. The demographic issues have a cumulative effect and it would be wrong to either presume that they had come suddenly or that they could have been reversed with the start up optimism of 'October 2000' changes, after which Serbian society has found itself only in the situation of prolonged economic crisis.

When analysing the natural component of population growth in Serbia, again not referring to the demography of Kosovo and Metohija, it can be noticed that starting from the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, population fertility rates in the country had significantly dropped (subreplacement fertility), and according to population projections, it will continue to decrease to 1.30 child per woman until the year 2020 (Rašević, 2012). **This reflects on natural population growth, remaining negative** in Serbia, and there are no indications this trend would change in a foreseeable period of time. Obviously, this was greatly influenced by the past internal conflicts, wars, economic sanctions, and other social instabilities that the Serbian society has been experiencing in the period of 25 years or so (Cvetičanin, 2012).

At the same time, **the intensive migration processes** have been going on in Serbia. After the mid-1990s, the war conflicts were terminated in the former Yugoslav republics, with approximately 400,000 refugees who were forced to leave their homes and found a new permanent residency in Serbia (Penev, 2008). Another wave of immigrants or „internally displaced citizens“ from Kosovo and Metohija (around 200,000) came to Central Serbia and Vojvodina after the bombardment of Serbia by NATO forces in 1999. Yet, despite the economic and political progress in Serbia as from the year 2000 onwards, the emigration of its most vital part of population has still been high, which especially considers people with University degree who left Serbia to permanently settle abroad (brain-drain). Although it is impossible to fully grasp the brain-drain quantities, estimations are that during the 1990s Serbia lost around 40,000 of its highly educated people who emigrated from the country. To illustrate the gravity of this issue, recent surveys show that up to 85% of the top Belgrade University students actively search for employment outside Serbia motivated by: small or no possibility whatsoever to find employment in the country (especially in their professional field), the lack of opportunity for professional advancement in that field, small wages, and the lack of possibility to afford a family start-up flat (Zbogom našoj deci – Zbogom našim parama, 2009). According to the most recent annual report on the global competitiveness given by the World Economic Forum, Serbia is ranked on 141 position out of 144 countries in respect to the 'brain-drain', being followed only by Burundi, Haiti and Algeria (WEF, 2012).

The balance between biological and mechanical component of population growth in Serbia varies between different groups of settlements. In that respect, by combining the data that are obtained from the Natural changes of population in the Republic of Serbia that cover the period until the year 2010 (SORS, 2012b) and the change in total number of population on the settlement level in the latest intercensus period (SORS 2004, SORS 2011) it is possible to make the following inferences. In the period 2002-2011, the population of big cities in Central Serbia marked growth exclusively because of the positive migratory balance. The City of Belgrade lost 20,240 people due to negative natural growth, but its overall population growth was positive due to positive migratory balance: 38,111. Two other big cities in Central Serbia (Niš and Kragujevac) had the same population development trajectory, where the total

population growth was the outcome of positive migratory balance only, which exceeded negative natural growth by ratio 1.8. On the other hand, in Vojvodina, Novi Sad was the only big city which marked population growth in the period 2002-2011, both because of positive natural growth (919) and positive migratory balance (29,530). However, this minimum positive natural growth in Novi Sad may not be of a long-term significance, and may be interpreted as a knee jerk benefit of demographic movements during the 1990s (immigration of younger population – refugees from the former Yugoslav republics and internally displaced people). The group of small and medium-sized towns in Central Serbia and Vojvodina, which was gaining population until the year 2002, registered total population decline in the latest intercensus period, and that should be ascribed to synergy effect between negative natural and migratory balances. Finally, the so-called 'other' (non-urban) settlements exhibit continuation of population decline as a predictable outcome of a mature stage in the ageing process and the consequent negative natural population growth (Jelić, Surčulija, 2012).

## DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT FOR URBAN SETTLEMENTS IN SERBIA

As previously pointed out, the main demographic expansion area for the territory of Serbia is the zone of (Sava) Dunav-Morava development axis, which largely corresponds to the one of major European multimodal transport corridors (i.e. Corridor X) (see: *Figure 6*). The demographic and other importance of this development axis is demonstrated by the fact that though it spatially covers some 26% of the territories of Central Serbia and Vojvodina together, it has been populated by more than half of the total population of the respective territories (Stojanović, Vojković, 2005).

When compared with the analyses that were elaborated by Stojanović and Vojković (2005) on data from 2002 Census regarding urban population in the zone of (Sava) Dunav-Morava development axis, 2011 Census data demonstrate further intensification of population concentration in this zone (almost 60% of the total urban population), especially in the big cities of Central Serbia and Vojvodina, which are dominantly located here, excluding Kragujevac, which although being positioned aside is still in the relative vicinity of the Corridor X. Big cities within the zone of (Sava) Dunav-Morava development axis encompassed approximately 39% of the total urban population in 2011, and the network of small and medium-sized towns in this zone



(around 35% of their total number in Central Serbia and Vojvodina) encompassed additional 20% of the country's urban population.

However, the key factor of distribution of population within the urban system from the largest to the smallest urban centres in Serbia is the distribution of power, resources and capacities within the local government structure. Belgrade metropolitan region is still the key pointer to unbalanced regional development of Serbia which, together with Novi Sad in its relative vicinity, forms the so-called 'Serbian spatial banana' that cumulates a large share of the country's population (almost 35%) and creates almost 60% of the national GDP (Vujošević *et al.*, 2012:153). When analysing the hierarchy in the country's urban settlement network, the advancement of macro-regional centres is needed in order to mitigate the acute issues of imbalance, i.e. extremely uneven regional development and weak territorial cohesion. At the same time, a more prudent steering and support of small and medium-sized towns development is essential, with hindsight that until recently they used to be the vital demographic reservoirs of Serbia.

With comparative observation of the Europe's urban structure, it can be noticed that big cities (especially high-profile world cities) also get most of the attention and maintain their (global) importance. The reason for this is, firstly, a considerable evidence of a positive correlation between an urban settlement's size and economic performance. Then, the largest cities perform multiple roles, nationally and internationally, as centres of government, advanced services, higher education, culture, etc. (Hall, 2003). Small and medium-sized towns, on the other hand, may be perceived to play a relatively peripheral role. However, though generally being neglected in the policy, the very many small and medium-sized towns are important to both regional and national economies. Within modern urban networks, they are seen as crucial link between big cities and rural areas, as well as in playing the major role in preventing urban sprawl and in slowing down suburbanisation process of Europe's big cities and metropolises (Satterthwaite, Tacoli, 2003). Generally, the policies to support regional development and small and medium-sized towns by linking peripheral regions to global networks are as important as ever, but may also be more difficult to realise.

## CONCLUSION

Following the stagnation in development during the 1980s and subsequent 'collapse' characterised by the sanctions and

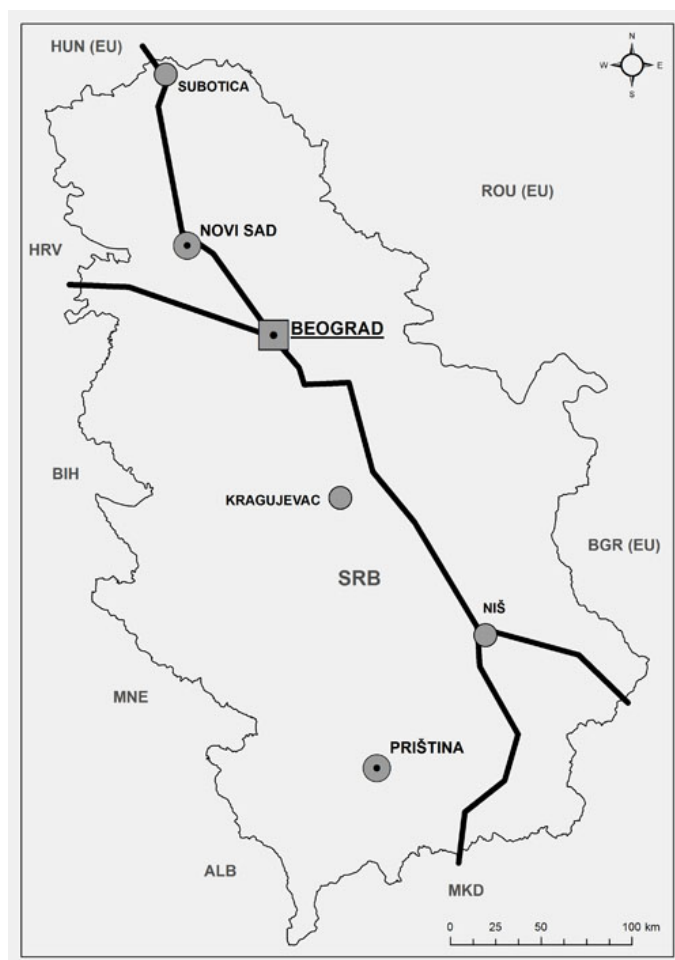


Figure 6. Corridor X in Serbia

international isolation of Serbia in the 1990s, even if there has been a dynamic but insufficient recovery in the period after the year 2000, Serbia is still faced with a situation of being in the so-called 'inner periphery of Europe' (Vujošević *et al.*, 2012), i.e. in the group of countries in which the differences between the developed and undeveloped regions are overwhelming, especially between Belgrade and Novi Sad agglomeration on the one side and the rest of the country on the other. As Vujošević (2012:228) points out, demographic and regional concepts in Serbia have not been mutually coordinated, and there are no effective implementation instruments for either one of them. Without full appreciation of the necessity to renew strategic research and thinking in Serbia and to focus on a selected number of key issues regarding the achievement of better impact on a spatial structure and distribution of population, the present large number of development issues will only accumulate and grow.

Migration processes, as the prime driver behind population changes need to be

especially addressed under the conditions of insufficient natural reproduction of population in Serbia. Economically developed countries typically deal with this problem by 'importing' young and qualified working force. Looking from a wider perspective, since the 1990s Europe has become one of the major destinations for migrants from all over the world and thus has become a continent of net immigration. In this period, east-west migration has developed as a result of the opening of the 'Iron Curtain' and ongoing integration processes. However, currently being at the periphery of these processes, Serbia doesn't have the economic power neither to attract immigration of specialists from abroad nor to retain its own high-profile work force.

The situation of in- and out- migration will remain the issue to be considered both in the countries that 'import' and in those which 'export' the work force. In the former, many problems may arise because of the interchange between 'old' and 'new' population (though the fear of mass immigration is perhaps

overstated), whereas in Serbia, as the representative of the latter, there may be serious problems due to out-migration in terms of provisions for the remaining old and less well-off residents. Furthermore, the combination of lower birth rates, skewed age and gender structures may cause a number of villages, towns and even the whole regions dying out. The result would then be the continuation of the bleak scenario on further redistribution of population in the country, from the more deprived to less deprived (urban) areas, and to Belgrade and Novi Sad agglomeration in particular.

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