Demographic tendencies in the Serbia-Croatia border region: A case study of the Zapadnobačka and Osiječko-baranjska region

Demographic trends are a current topic today, because a large part of the European continent, and therefore the post-Yugoslav countries, are characterized by processes of depopulation, senility, and significant emigration. The border areas of the states, which are located outside the main economic streams in the country, are particularly at risk and are rapidly becoming depopulated. The paper focuses on studying the demographic characteristics of the border area of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia. The analysis was carried out at the level of NUTS 3 (Zapadnobačka oblast in the Republic of Serbia and Osiječko-baranjska županija in the Republic of Croatia) to observe the similarities and differences in the demographic characteristics of the mentioned territory. Census data from both countries were used (Croatia - 2011 and 2021; Serbia - 2011 and 2022). One of the priorities of the work is to determine the trend of population movement in the border area of one country that is a member of the European Union (the Republic of Croatia since 2013) and another, neighbouring country, which is a candidate for membership (the Republic of Serbia since 2012). The following were considered: the change in the number of inhabitants, the average age of the population, the rates of birth, mortality, and natural increase, the rates of emigration, immigration, and migration balance, the age-sex structure of the population, to more meaningfully understand the demographic tendencies of this border area and give predictions for the future. The results of the research show that between 2011 and 2022, the Zapadnobačka oblast lost 33,596 inhabitants, i.e. 17.86%, while Osiječko-baranjska županija lost 47,006 inhabitants in the period from 2011 to 2021, i.e. 15.41%. Such data were influenced by the decline in fertility, negative natural growth, and the migration balance. Bearing this in mind, the paper proposes measures that can improve the demographic picture of the studied area, and they concern cross-border cooperation between the two countries and the application of good practice solutions implemented by countries facing the same problems.

**Keywords:** Depopulation, natural increase, migration, age-sex structure of the population