Consequences of economic transition on demographic processes in the Baranja region in the Republic of Croatia

The transition of the European former socialist countries had different consequences on their development. Most of the countries did not achieve the expected successes. The border regions in this context became connectors and initiators of the cross-border cooperation, due to the relation intensification between the transition countries and the developed countries of the European Union. The research studies the impact of the transition on the integration of the Baranja within the framework of the national and wider regional market - especially in the conditions of globalization, changes in the geographical position and the meaning of borders within the framework of the European Union and the Schengen area. The area of Baranja is organized as part of the Osijek-Baranja County, organized through nine local self-government units and 52 settlements, one of which is a town. Differences in the forms and intensity of spatial processes in the transition are conditioned by the location, traffic accessibility and the change in the meaning of the main centres of work and have influenced the strengthening of negative demographic processes near the state border. A demogeographical analysis was made according to the data available from authorized databases and supplemented by the research interview method. Demographic dynamics, total population change and changes in population structures from 1991 to the recent period, 2021, were analysed. A comparison of the age index over time indicates an advanced process of senility and the absence of bioreproductive potential. Traditionally low birth rates, war events and emigration of the population have had a negative impact on the recent regional demographic and economic development. In addition to intensive emigration, which was most pronounced in the nineties and after the accession to the European Union, this cumulatively adds to the impossibility of valorising the economic potential. Despite the expected development shifts through the process of transition, in the case of the border region of Baranja, the result is the opposite. In order to confirm this, the method of calculating a synthetic indicator, the index of demographic resources, was used. The components of the index are the demographic index and the education index and clearly indicate the collapse of the demographic potential in the observed area. Microsoft Excel and Arc Map 9.3 techniques were used for tabular analysis of statistical data and visualization of selected parameters. The region lags behind the national and European average because, at the beginning of the system reforms, it was not brought to an equally position to participate in development. New opportunities for the researched area appear due to the change in geographical position by joining the European Union and the Schengen area. A possible solution to stagnation would be economic development based on a multi-sectoral model of economic development. For the stabilization of rural areas and the inclusion of Baranja in regional flows and the European market, a more coherent spatial organization is necessary, with the functional strengthening of central settlements. The construction of the Vc corridor opens numerous opportunities for networking, cross-border cooperation and territorial cohesion.

Keywords: transition, demographic processes, spatial development effects, regional development, territorial cohesion