

PROBLEMS OF BORDER REGIONS IN BULGARIA

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Introduction

The paper reveals some socio-economic and demographic issues of the municipalities that form a belt along the national borders of Bulgaria. For a long period of time, those areas have been in an unfavourable geographic position compared to the areas inside the country, because of wars and following border changes, and during the period between 1944 and 1989, those areas continued to suffer from isolation due to political reasons.

It should be noted that municipalities along the Black Sea are not considered as border regions. The paper concentrates on the areas along the southern, western and the northern national borders only.

In the years of the so called transition to the market economy, the border regions of Bulgaria (especially those along the southern and western border) became accessible and are no longer restricted areas. However, the impact of long-term isolation is apparently not so easy to overcome. Despite the new border check points that have recently been opened, Bulgarian borders still seem to be a separating line rather than contact lines of the national territory with neighbouring countries. To some extent, an explanation of that situation is the terrain itself – with very few exceptions, all the municipalities along the southern and western border are situated in mountainous and hilly areas, which poses many problems for transportation and economic development. On the other hand, an additional effect seems to have the degree of development of border regions of the neighbouring countries' themselves.

The modern national borders of Bulgaria were outlined back in 1940. Due to geopolitical reasons, border regions used to be treated as buffer zones used for military purposes, and therefore those areas were neglected and the investments limited. After the WW 2, because of the block separation and confrontation, border areas developed slower than the rest of the country. As a result, border regions became a less developed periphery of an unfavourable geographic location. On the other hand, the western and southern borders of Bulgaria are situated in mountainous regions, which further increased their isolation.

In this paper, the municipalities along the Black sea coast are not regarded as border regions (except for the northernmost and the southernmost). Only regions along the south-eastern, the southern, the western and the northern border have

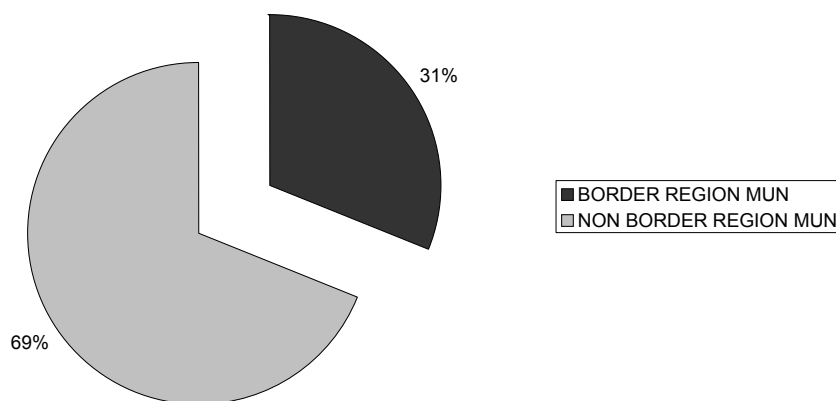
been taken in consideration. The delimited border areas include a total of 82 municipalities (31 % of all Bulgarian municipalities), which cover 24% of the national territory and give home to 15 % of the Bulgarian population (*Figure 1*). The majority of border municipalities are sparsely populated and generally unattractive, which results in a population density of only 41 people per square kilometre or almost two times lower than the national average (*Figure 2*).

The natural potential of border regions is quite limited and insufficient. The mountainous terrain is a major obstacle for transport development and cross-border cooperation. The density of the road network is less than 20 km/100 sq km and the roads are of a low class and hard to maintain. There are settlements deprived of access to roads with hard (asphalt) covering. The Rodopi and Strandzha regions, have very low railroad accessibility. The idea of linking the Bulgarian railroad network to that of Greece, by continuing the railway from Podkova toward the White Sea (corridor No 9), has not been accomplished yet. Along the southern borders of Bulgaria, there are only 6 BCPs, two of which were launched after 2000. The Danube River represents the longer part of the northern border with Romania and a natural barrier for cross-border cooperation. Along 470 km there is only one bridge at Ruse–Giurgiu, while the construction of the second, at Vidin–Calafat, has not even begun.

There are four ferryboat lines along the Danube River, and at least one more is expected to be launched. Along the land border with Romania, there are three BCPs which are generally not busy and have little effect on the local economy.

Figure 1

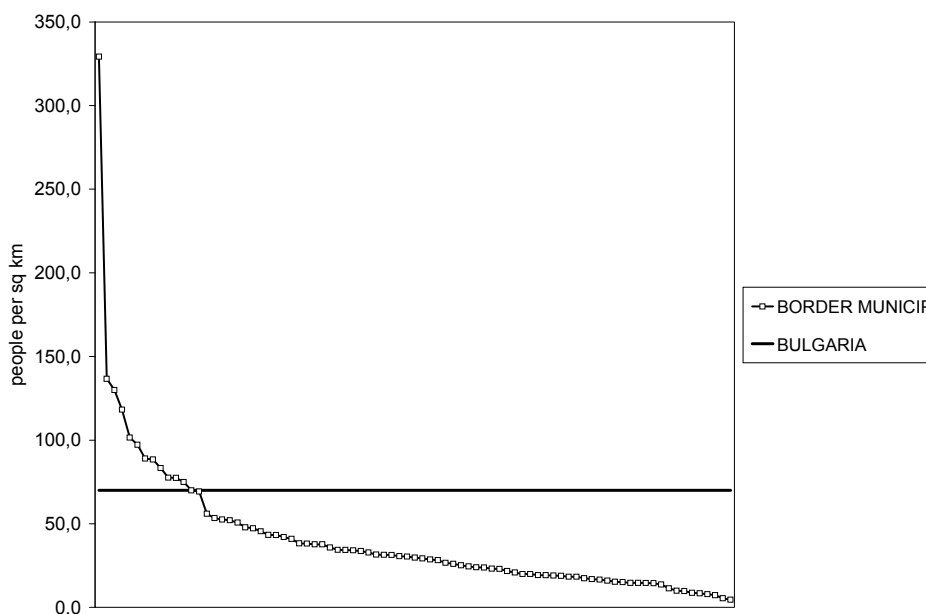
Number and share of border and nonborder region municipalities in Bulgaria



Source: Authors' construction.

Figure 2

Population density in border region municipalities (2006)



Source: Authors' construction

The western border with Serbia and FYROM there is crossed by only one railway (at Kalotina BCP), while the railway networks of Bulgaria and FYROM have not been linked yet. The western border can be crossed at 8 BPSs, in comparatively hard terrain, which results in limited opportunities for cross-border cooperation. All regions on both sides of the western border are less developed due to natural and economic conditions, and therefore, despite all expectations, economic revival triggered by cross-border cooperation has not been observed so far. Limited communication has a negative effect on the general socio-economic development of border regions and the country as a whole.

As far as nature resources are concerned, there are conditions for development of timber and ore output industry in some border regions, though the ore output was significantly reduced after 1992. During the years of transition to the market economy, the timber industry developed, as well as other activities such as mushroom and herb gathering etc. The existing tourist and recreational potential of border areas, has not been utilized to a sufficient level. There are also some unutilised waters in border areas whose exploitation is a matter of bilateral agreements. Very

little of the huge potential of the Danube River is used, especially for agriculture, tourism, industry etc.

During the years of transition to market economy and the fall of strict border access regimes, together with the NATO and EU membership of Bulgaria, border regions, especially those along the southern and the western border, became more accessible and are no longer restricted areas. However, due to long periods of isolation, those regions inherited a whole range of demographic and socio-economic problems, many of which still wait to be solved, despite the variety of regional development programmes and strategies in place.

The border regions of Bulgaria suffer from a significant demographic crisis. Some of those areas began to depopulate in the early 1960s of the 20th century (especially the municipalities along the western and the south-eastern border), due to large scale migration outflows toward the inner parts of the country. For the period between 1992 and 2007 the population of border regions has decreased by 300,000 people or 17.5%. The average annual decrease is quite stable at levels of 19,600 people (1992–2001) and 18 900 people (2002–2007). The highest level of population losses is typical for the least developed municipalities such as Boynitsa, George Damyanovo and Chiprovtsi and Nevestino municipalities along the western border, which have decreased their population by 40 to 42 % for the period between 1992 and 2007. Some municipalities suffered a similar loss due to emigration of Bulgarian Turks (representing the majority of their population) to the Republic of Turkey (Krumovgrad municipality – 40 % decrease of population).

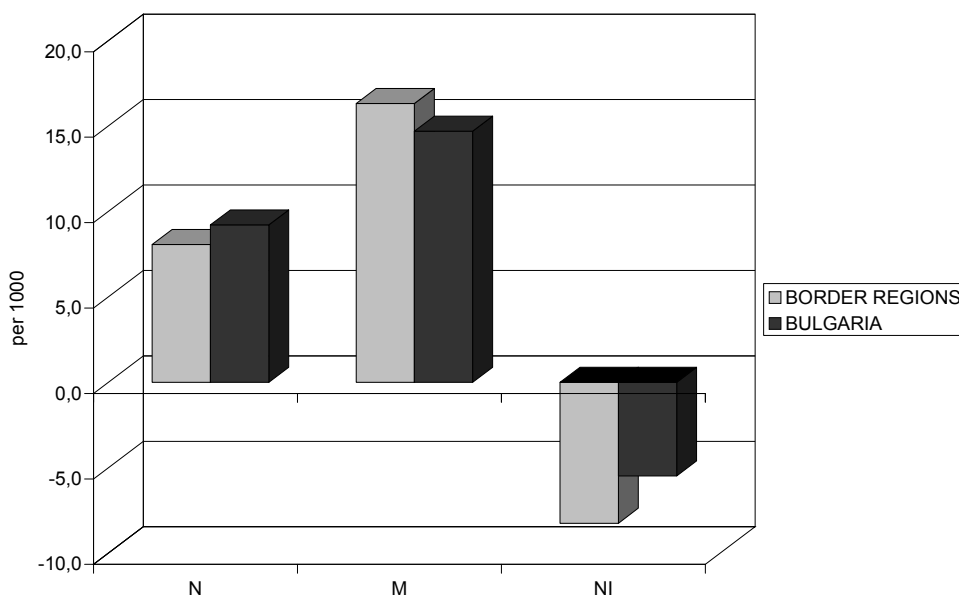
The reproduction of population in border regions as whole is a regressive type. All border municipalities have seen a natural decrease of the population since 1990, except for some municipalities populated by Bulgarian Muslims, or Pomaks, in the Western Rodopi region along the Bulgarian–Greek border. The average natural increase of the border regions population is –8.3‰, which is lower than the national average (–5.5‰). In modern days, the negative natural increase is the leading factor for loss of population in border areas. That natural decrease of Bulgarian population is a result of extremely low birth rates of 8.1‰ (9.2‰ – national average) and high death rates, reaching 16.3‰ (14.7‰ national average). The reproduction parameters are the worst in municipalities along the western border (–18.8‰ natural increase). The regressive type of reproduction leads to problems of various nature – destabilization of municipalities due to the lack of demographic potential, ageing of the population and the respective social and healthcare needs that follow, of school closures due to an insufficient number of students etc. (*Figure 3*).

The emigration flow in border regions is generated mainly in municipalities with predominantly Turkish population. The internal migration rate is also negative (around –4‰) which contributes to the depopulation of border regions. The immigration to migration rate is 18‰ to 22‰. The highest emigration rate is measured

in municipalities along the Bulgarian–Greek border (–6.5‰) and the Bulgarian–Romanian border (–3.5‰). This is a reflection of unfavourable socio-economic conditions together with a sufficient demographic potential to form an emigration flow. The formation of such a flow is possible due mainly to high unemployment levels. In flat terrain areas, high levels of unemployment are due to agriculture structural reformations, which result in the preference of highly mechanised agriculture (mainly grain and sunflower production). The opposite immigration flow toward border regions is generated mostly by elderly residents as well as unemployed people, who return to their homes.

Figure 3

*Crude birth rate (N), death rate (M) and natural increase (NI)
of the population (2005)*



Source: Authors' construction

Another major problem of population in border regions is ageing. Generally, border areas do not differ from the rest of the country as far as the 0–14 demographic group is concerned (15.2%), and as for the 60+ group – the share of that group is only 2 percentage points higher in border regions (24.5%) compared to the national average. The active age population group ages as well and accumulation

of population in higher ages within that group is continuous. In the near future that process will result in a large-scale shortage of labour force in border areas, which is going to pose major difficulties for the eventual improvement of the policies targeting labour force demographic characteristics. Aging of border regions population poses also the question of the income and social security of elderly residents. The Bulgarian pension system operates on conditions of low investments interests, high levels of unemployment, low production efficiency, a large share of grey economy etc., factors which further worsen the situation. The higher share of people over 60, leads to a low living standard and a lack of opportunity for a decent existence in many border areas. The existing healthcare system was not made to handle such high portions of population over 60 years of age, considering that healthcare expenses grow dramatically when that population group is concerned.

Another ageing feature is the shrinking of the fundament of the age-sex pyramid, which also leads to a chain of negative consequences such as decreasing chances for a normal reproduction of the population, deterioration of the school and other facilities network etc. In many of the smaller border municipalities, it is impossible to form classes or groups of students and to sustain a normal education process. The closure of schools triggers the emigration of families with children which contributes to the depopulation process.

The unemployment level in border regions is 11.5% (2006), which, as mentioned above, is 2.4 points higher than the national average (9.1%). A quarter of all unemployed people in the country reside in border regions. However, that relatively low unemployment level is a result of the extremely low unemployment levels in some of the larger cities in border areas, such as Ruse, Blagoevgrad etc. In fact, the unemployment level in 25 border municipalities (nearly 1/3 of all border municipalities) is over 20% (Dimovo – 40%, Ruzhintsi – 38%, Bregovo – 29%, Kaynardzha – 36% etc.). This is a result of closing a range of industries during the transition to market economy – reducing the ore output, closing of branch-factories, arable land restitution, liquidation of cooperative farms etc. On the other hand, those areas are unattractive for local and foreign investors – mostly Greek and Turkish, who open only small firms in the field of shoes and clothing industries – requiring fewer investments. Such firms function for a period of one to three years or even less, using only the cheap labor force and client/customer supplied materials. Therefore, border regions have little contribution for the national industry. Labor efficiency in border areas is twice lower than the national average and thus the industry generated income (per capita) is only 40% of the national average. Thus, the “center – periphery” problem is sharpened additionally and the standard of living in border regions is worsened.

In general, problems of border areas can be defined as follows:

1. Legislative changes – the formerly distinguished target regions, such as backward rural regions, regions for cross-border cooperation etc., do not ex-

ist anymore and the target regions in the district development strategies have not been defined yet;

2. As a result of geographic location, the attention paid to the regional economic relations is not enough. Therefore, border areas remain disconnected from the neighbouring countries. The last represents a major obstacle for intensifying economic activities in those areas;
3. Relatively weak transport infrastructure, distant from the major Eurocorridors and urbanisation axes of Bulgaria. That transport isolation, together with the existing relations with neighboring countries, hinders the formation of higher concentration of population and industries on both sides of the border – something typical for border areas in developed EU countries;
4. Constantly spreading depopulation, leading to the degradation of the settlement network and making economic stimulation and revival impossible;
5. The highly deteriorated age structure of the population in some areas leads to a very high economic burden for the active population and to a constricted reproduction of the population;
6. The regressive type of reproduction narrows the fundament of the sex-age pyramid of the population and its widening at the top, which leads to negative subsequent changes in the educational, social and healthcare infrastructure;
7. Sustainable emigration flows leading to a constant depopulation and age structure deterioration;
8. The lack of national priorities for border regions development and the lack of coordination between the regional development strategies make it impossible to implement the Lisbon Strategy requirements for developing a knowledge-based and competitive economy.

The aforementioned demographic problems of border regions of Bulgaria reflect a more complex socio-economic situation in those regions which additionally can be described using other examples, such as GDP per capita, HDI etc., which however are less accurate on a municipal level and harder to calculate on such a level.

However, when talking about border regions in Bulgaria there are several basic conclusions that can be made:

- The launch of new BCPs is generally overestimated in their efficiency, because on their own, they are not able to solve the majority of economic and employment issues in border municipalities;
- The Bulgarian legislative body and the government (at central and local levels) work without the coordination of place and time, which is fundamental part of efficient regional development, which is regarded more as a problem only of the Regional development ministry, rather than an integral problem of

almost each ministry. Therefore, we can not expect faster development, increase of the living standard and overcoming the “centre–periphery” problems, unless the separate ministries come out of their “separate” approach and the integral approach is legitimated.

- Because of the distant geographic location of Bulgaria (considering the location of the economic centre of Europe), the Balkan countries should seek a closer contact in order to achieve better economic relations and cross-border cooperation. The existing lack of connectivity between the transport network of Bulgaria and its neighbouring countries represents a huge barrier on the way to achieve that goal.
- Unlike the more developed European regions, border regions in the Balkan countries are less developed and sparsely populated, which is a result of deliberate isolation of those regions for political reasons. Therefore, the formation of Euroregions between Bulgaria and its neighbouring countries would not be efficient because those regions would consist of equally underdeveloped border regions.
- Cross-border cooperation could reduce the negative effect of economic isolation of border areas, although “miracles” cannot be expected in the short-term. In the long-term, however, cross-border cooperation is an optimal solution of socio-economic problems of border areas.

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