CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC PROCESSES IN THE RAŠKA REGION AND THEIR IMPACT ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

UDC: 911.3:32(497.11)
314.116-022.252(497.11)"1991/2022"
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37658/MGD24137p

Mila PAVLOVIĆ, Aleksandar KOVJANIĆ, Filip KRSTIĆ
Faculty of Geography – University of Belgrade, Studentski trg 3/III Belgrade, Republic of Serbia
e-mail: mila.pavlovic2@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Raška region is located in the southwestern part of Serbia. The territory of the Raška region includes six municipalities in Serbia: Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Prijepolje, Priboj and Nova Varoš. In addition, it includes the area of five municipalities in Montenegro: Pljevlja, Bijelo Polje, Berane, Petnjica and Rožaje. For the purposes of this work, the area belonging to Serbia was analyzed. It has an area of 4,504 km^2 and a total of 438 settlements.The geostrategic position of the Raška region has changed throughout history. It represents the historical core of the Serbian medieval state. The Serbian medieval state got its name from this region. That is why it has always had great importance from the political, demographic and economic point of view. The area of the Raška region represents a multi-ethnic environment, which is its basic demographic feature. The paper analyzes its geopolitical position, as well as demographic changes in the period 1991-2022. The population dynamic, natural changes of the population and the changes in the national structure were analyzed. Demographic processes in the region were influenced by several factors, the most important of which are settlement conditions, the level of economic development, and processes of urbanization and migration, especially in the rural-urban relationship. The Raška region has considerable natural potential that has not been adequately utilized for the purpose of economic development. Faster economic development will also condition the reduction of negative demographic processes, primarily emigration from rural areas.

Keywords: Raška region, Novi Pazar, depopulation, ethnic structure.

INTRODUCTION

The Raška region encompasses parts of southwestern Serbia and northeastern Montenegro. It is the territory where the first Serbian medieval state - Raška - was founded. That territory includes the area from river Tara in the south to mountains Golija, Javor, Čemernica, Murtenica and Zlatibor in the north and between the Drina river in the west and the Ibar river in the east. Administratively, the Raška region includes the territories of eleven municipalities, six of which are in Serbia (Priboj, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš, Sjenica, Novi Pazar and Tutin) and five in Montenegro (Pljevlja, Bijelo Polje, Berane, Petnjica[4] and Rožaje). This research is limited to the part of the region that belongs to Serbia.

Throughout history, the territory of this region has been the center of Serbian statehood, spirituality, prosperity, culture, and also the place where architecture, painting and literature

[4] The territory of today's municipality of Petnjica belonged to the territory of the municipality of Berane. With the new administrative division in Montenegro, it was separated as an independent municipality in 2013.

flourished. The importance of Raška in the Middle Ages is told by numerous cultural and historical monuments, among which the most significant are: the old town of Ras (the seat of Nemanja's medieval state from the 12th century), the Đurđevi stupovi monastery, the Sopoćani monastery, traces of Nemanjić dynasty in Deževa (the fountain and the foundations of the medieval church), Peter's church, the Mileševa monastery and the Banja monastery (St. Nicholas of Dabarski). Many of these endowments are included in the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage. During centuries of Ottoman empire's rule, the region was strongly influenced by their culture and Islam. As a consequence of the centuries-old rule of the Ottoman empire, the ethnic and religious structure of the population changed. By the decision of the Congress of Berlin in 1878, a Turkish administrative unit was formed on the territory of the medieval state of Raška – Sandjak of Novi Pazar[5]. Although this unit and term officially existed for only a few decades (until the liberation in the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913), the name "Sandžak" (or Sanjak) has remained in use to this day, especially among the Bosniak (Muslim) population (Павловић & Мишовић, 2007, Павловић & Мишовић, 2012).



Figure 1. Geographical position and administrative division of the Raška region, author: Krstić, F.

On the territory of Serbia, the Raška region has an area of 4,503 km^2 (5.1% of the territory of Serbia) within its administrative and municipal boundaries. According to the results of the last population census in 2022, 233,091 inhabitants lived in this region, which is a relative share of 3.5% of the total population of Serbia. With an average population density of 51.8 people/km^2,

[5] The term "sanjak" originates from the period of Turkish rule in Serbian and other Balkan lands. It denoted a smaller administrative unit in the Turkish administration, which existed throughout the Turkish Empire (Petrović, 1997). Sandžak as a geographical name should have disappeared from the Raška region with the end of Turkish rule, but it remained until the middle of the second decade of the 21st century.

the Raška region belongs to the sparsely populated regions of Serbia. There are 438 settlements in the region, of which 6 are urban. The largest number of highland and mountainous settlements (and even 4 out of 6 urban settlements) are affected by the depopulation process.

GEOSTRATEGIC POSITION

From a historical point of view, the geostrategic position of the Raška region has changed over time. That is why it has always had great importance in the wider region from a political, geographical, military-strategic and economic point of view. The changes that occurred through the historical development of the region are the result of socio-economic and historical-political circumstances in Serbia and Montenegro, but also in Southeast Europe (Гиговић, 2010, Павловић & Мишовић, 2012).

During the studied historical period of three decades (1991-2022), the geostrategic position and importance of the Raška region underwent significant changes. After Montenegro declared its independence in 2006, the place and importance of the Raška region changed significantly for both countries. In a geographical sense, this region no longer represents a compact geographical area, but is divided into a larger Serbian and a smaller Montenegrin part. The division of the territory caused the loss of the significance of the geostrategic position and gave it a peripheral role in both countries. In this way, the function of connecting neighboring and wider areas of the Balkan Peninsula is diminished (Павловић & Мишовић, 2007, Павловић & Мишовић 2012). These major geopolitical changes, along with complex socio-political circumstances, resulted in the geostrategic position of Raška becoming even more complex, sensitive and unfavorable during the first two decades of the 21st century.

The geostrategic position, in addition to influencing all spheres of life in the region, also has a great impact on regional development. This position of the Raška region is extremely complex and important in contemporary geopolitical circumstances. The complexity and importance of the position are considered from different aspects (Павловић & Мишовић 2012). The most important elements of the geostrategic position include:

- Peripheral position in relation to the entire territory of Serbia;
- Belonging to the western hilly-mountainous morphological unit, within the wider Dinaric region;
- Border area towards Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- Close proximity to the Ibar valley and Kosovo and Metohija;
- Absence of significant international roads;[6]
- Heterogeneity of the ethno-demographic structure of the population;
- The influence of various geographical factors on life in the region (especially the relief);
- Strategic mineral reserves and energy resources;
- Rich cultural and historical heritage;
- An economically underdeveloped part of Serbia;
- Importance from the aspect of defense for both countries (Serbia and Montenegro);

[6] There is a plan to build a highway that will connect Belgrade with the Montenegrin coast. Certain sections in Serbia and Montenegro have been completed, while the segment through the Raška region has been left for the final phase. In the region, the planned highway route is traced over the Pešter plateau, specifically through the territory of the municipality of Sjenica.

GEOPOLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE RAŠKA REGION

The geopolitical processes that affected the Raška region are complex and mutually conditioned. They come from Serbia's position in Southeast Europe (the Balkans) and the world. The Raška region within Serbia has a specific geopolitical position, which is a consequence of the region's peripheral position, heterogeneous ethnic structure, economic underdevelopment, etc. When analyzing geopolitical processes in the region, external factors (influence of other countries or international organizations), which have a great influence, must also be taken into account. Throughout history, this region has been the subject of interest for the former powers from the East and the West. On its territory, the influences of major regional powers were and are being refracted (Гиговић, 2010). Bearing in mind the natural and socio-geographic features of the Raška region, it has the role of a complex local and regional political factor in the area of Southeastern Europe, the Balkans and Serbia. The most significant and influential factors of the region's geopolitical position are the Islamic factor, whose role in this area is getting stronger, membership in the European Union and other international organizations and associations, the existence of crisis hotspots and numerous problems of an economic nature.

The border geographical position of the region, between potential conflict hotspots (Autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohija and Bosnia and Herzegovina - Republika Srpska) can have an impact on the Raška region and its regional development. In accordance with the current geopolitical processes in the environment, the Raška region can play the role of a stabilizing or destabilizing factor. This means that the Raška region could be a territory that unites or separates neighboring areas, or a territory that absorbs destabilizing impulses from the environment or spills those impulses onto neighboring areas (Мишовић & Ћурчић, 1996). Also, the connection between Serbia and Montenegro is carried out through the territory of the Raška region. As a result, it has a special significance. Its strategic importance was increased by the construction of the railway line Belgrade – Bar (in 1977) and the planned construction of the highway Belgrade – Boljari – Podgorica. The development of infrastructure and better traffic connections (within the region itself or with neighboring regions) would lead to faster economic development in this part of Serbia. This would slow down negative demographic processes, primarily the process of emigration, and affect the improvement of the economic standard. A more balanced regional development would also have an impact on better cohesive ties within the state.

DEMOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENT

Contemporary demographic processes in the Raška region were influenced by several factors, the most important of which are: socio-historical features of the region, natural conditions of settlements, level of economic development, natural population growth, migration (emigration and internal rural-urban migration) and pronounced processes of deagrarization and urbanization. This region is characterized by a slower economic transformation, as well as slower changes in the economic, social and cultural features of the population. This caused the slower process of demographic transition compared to other parts of Serbia (Павловић & Мишовић, 2012). The highest population concentration is in the valleys and basins, where the

largest urban settlements were formed, while the most sparsely populated mountainous parts of the region are dominated by disperse and demographically small rural settlements (Павловић, 2019). In addition to the pronounced spatial differentiation of the population, the main demographic characteristic of the region is ethnic and religious heterogeneity and depopulation of rural areas. Contemporary demographic processes in this region are very complex. The most important aree: the change in the number of inhabitants, the natural increase of the populpation and the ethnic structure of the population. A comparative approach to the results of the census from 1991 to 2022 will enable the analysis of relevant indicators of the demographic state of the Raška region and indicate the possibilities of socioeconomic revitalization.

Population dynamic

The Raška region is included in the group of geographical regions of Serbia that are affected by an intensive process of depopulation. However, population dynamics in the mentioned time period were not continuous either spatially or temporally. In the period from 1991 to 2022, the total number of inhabitants of the Raška region decreased from 257,849 to 233,091, which is a decrease of 9.6%. The trend of decreasing population in the Raška region affected all municipalities, except for Novi Pazar, where the population increased by 25.2%. The largest relative decrease in the number of inhabitants was recorded in the territory of the municipality of Nova Varoš (-38.1%), followed by the municipalities of Priboj (-34.6%), Prijepolje (-30.8%), Sjenica (-28.5%) and Tutin (-4.6%) (Table 1). The main causes of the population decline in this period were the relatively low rate of natural increase and the negative migration balance. The Raška region is an area from which the population traditionally emigrates, but it is noticeable that the Bosniak-Muslim population is less mobile. For this reason, the main demographic features, as well as the movement of the population, show significant spatial differentiation. The population increase of the municipality of Novi Pazar, compared to other municipalities, indicates that the local economy managed to "sustain" itself during the turbulent decades. With such characteristics, it managed to attract the population from its immediate surroundings (Pešter plateau, Rogozna and Golija mountains). These processes caused the city of Novi Pazar to become a regional center.

Observed by inter-census periods, between 1991 and 2002, a sharp decline in the number of inhabitants of the Raška region was recorded (-8.6%). Drastic (geo)political and economic changes had a decisive influence on population dynamics. The last decade of the 20th century was marked by the breakup of Yugoslavia and the economic crisis. Many industrial facilities, which were the carriers of the economic development of the region, stopped working, due to which the population was forced to emigrate for economic reasons. Although the natural increase was relatively high, it could not compensate for the negative migration balance. The Serbian population mostly emigrated to the larger cities of Central Serbia (Belgrade, Kragujevac, Kraljevo, Čačak), and the Bosniak population to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the countries of Western Europe (to a much lesser extent to Turkey). In this period, negative demographic processes affected all municipalities, with the exception of Novi Pazar, where there was a slight increase in the population.

Table 1. Number of inhabitants in Raška region (1991-2022)

Municipality	Census				Change 1991-2022	
	1991	2002	2011	2022	Num.	%
Nova Varoš	21,812	19,982	16,638	13,507	-8,305	-38.1
Priboj	35,951	30,377	27,133	23,514	-12,437	-34.6
Prijepolje	46,525	41,188	37,059	32,214	-14,311	-30.8
Sjenica	33,681	27,970	26,392	24,083	-9,598	-28.5
Novi Pazar	85,249	85,996	100,410	106,720	+21,471	+25.2
Tutin	34,631	30,054	31,155	33,053	-1,578	-4.6
Raška region	257,849	235,567	238,787	233,091	-24,758	-9.6

Source: https://data.stat.gov.rs (Accessed: 5.3.2024)

During the first decade of the 21st century, there is a certain stabilization of socioeconomic living conditions. This had a positive effect on the dynamic of the total population. In the period from 2002 to 2011, the population of the Raška region increased by 1.4%. However, at the municipal level, the formation of zones with different demographic characteristics and the intensity of population growth or decline can be observed. An increase in the number of inhabitants was achieved in the municipalities of Novi Pazar by 16.8% and Tutin by 3.7%, while in the municipalities of Priboj and Nova Varoš, a decrease in the number of inhabitants was recorded by 10.7% and 16.7%, respectively (Table 1). To a significant extent, this is conditioned by the faster decline of natural growth in municipalities with a dominant Serbian population.

In the last intercensal period (2011-2022), the region experienced depopulation again by -2.4%. At the municipal level, this period is characterized by similar demographic tendencies. The trend of population decline in depopulated municipalities became more pronounced. The decline in the number of inhabitants ranged from -18.8% in Nova Varoš to -8.7% in Sjenica. The municipalities of Novi Pazar and Tutin continue to experience an increase in the number of inhabitants during this inter-census period (Table 2). However, the population growth in these municipalities was recorded by the urban settlements of Novi Pazar and Tutin and their suburban settlements, while the largest part of the rural area continued to lose its population.

The depopulation of the Raška region is largely the result of emigration of the young and workforce population, but also due to the negative natural increase in the Serbian population. Population migration, especially economic ones, cannot be prevented without creating optimal conditions that will enable young people to see their future and perspective in the region. The decrease in the number of inhabitants directly affects the decrease in the workforce in the Raška region. This is especially noticeable in rural households, because the depopulation affected rural settlements the most. This has a negative impact on economic development. The old rural population is unable to engage in animal husbandry, and in recent times, fruit growing (raspberry plantations are being planted in the vicinity of Novi Pazar, Nova Varoš and Priboj). In addition, a large number of natural potentials of the Raška region have not been economically used, so that they could influence a more balanced regional development, and thus slow down migration flows, primarily in the rural-urban relationship.

Natural changes of population

The natural changes of population in the Raška region are a consequence of the socio-economic characteristics of the region and uneven regional development. This demographic indicator has undergone significant changes in the period from 1991 to 2022. At the regional level, the birth rate in this period decreased from 18.6‰ to 13.8‰. However, differences in the intensity of natural changes of population are observed at the municipal level. In 1991, the birth rate was high in the municipalities of Novi Pazar (21.5‰), Tutin (21.5‰), and Sjenica (20.2‰), which have a Bosniak majority population, while it was moderate in the municipalities of Prijepolje (15.6‰), Priboj (14.6‰), and Nova Varoš (12.9‰). In census years, the number of live births, as well as the birth rate, mostly declined in most municipalities, except in Tutin and Novi Pazar. At the beginning of the 21st century, the birth rate was moderate or low in all municipalities of the Raška region. Despite the dominant process of demographic transition, a slight increase in the birth rate was recorded in the last intercensal period (2011 – 12.5‰; 2022 – 13.8‰). The slight increase in the birth rate and the number of live births in 2022 is explained by the fact that this was a compensatory year, due to reduced birth rates, or postponement of births, during the first and second years of the coronavirus pandemic. An increase in the birth rate was recorded in municipalities with a Bosniak majority, which maintained moderate rates (Tutin – 18.3‰, Novi Pazar – 16.1‰, and Sjenica – 14.8‰). Municipalities with a Serbian majority also experienced an increase (Nova Varoš – 2011 – 5.4‰; 2022 – 7.1‰) or a slight decrease compared to previous periods (Table 2).

Table 2. Natural population movement of the Raška region from 1991 to 2022 (‰)

Municipality	1991			2002			2011			2022		
	B	M	NG	B	M	NG	B	M	NG	B	M	NG
Nova Varoš	12.9	9.4	3.5	7.1	11.2	-4.1	5.4	14.7	-9.3	7.1	20.3	-13.1
Priboj	14.6	6.6	8.0	11.0	9.4	1.6	6.4	11.6	-5.2	5.9	15.7	-9.9
Prijepolje	15.6	8.4	7.2	12.7	11.7	1.0	9.9	12.5	-2.6	9.3	14.0	-4.7
Sjenica	20.2	6.1	13.9	15.7	7.9	7.8	11.9	9.9	2.0	14.8	13.6	1.2
Novi Pazar	21.5	6.8	14.7	18.9	7.8	11.1	15.1	8.0	7.1	16.1	7.9	8.2
Tutin	21.5	5.1	16.4	22.4	6.9	15.5	17.4	7.4	10.1	18.3	7.5	10.8
Raška region	18.6	7.0	11.6	15.9	8.9	7.0	12.5	9.7	2.8	13.8	10.8	3.0

B – Birth rate; M – Mortality rate; NG – Natural growth rate

Source: https://data.stat.gov.rs (Accessed: 5.3.2024)

During the period from 1991 to 2022, the mortality rate of the population of the Raška region showed a constant slight increase. The mortality rate in this period increased from 7.0‰ to 10.8‰. At the beginning of the observed period, the mortality rate of all municipalities was low (Tutin – 5.1‰; Nova Varoš – 9.4‰). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the population's mortality rate has gradually assumed moderate rates, especially in municipalities with a Serbian majority. Differences in the mortality rate of the population of individual municipalities were increasing, due to different models of reproductive behavior of individual ethnic communities (Vlahović, 1997, Pavlović & Mišović, 2012). The increase in mortality is the result of depopulation and demographic aging of the population of the Raška region, conditioned by the emigration of younger, working-age population and longer life expectancy. Until 2022, low mortality rates were characteristic only of the municipalities of Tutin (7.5‰) and Novi Pazar (7.9‰), while it was high in the municipality of Nova Varoš (20.3‰). In the municipalities of Tutin and

Novi Pazar, there was a slight change in the mortality rate from 2011 to 2022 (Table 2). The stagnation of the population's mortality in these municipalities is a consequence of the slower process of demographic aging.

Due to the decline in the birth rate and the increase in mortality, the population of the Raška region is characterized by a tendency of a decline in natural growth. At the turn of the 20th to the 21st century, the decline in the natural growth rate was intensive (1991 – 11.6‰; 2011 – 2.8‰), but in the last intercensal period, there was stabilization and a slight increase (2022 – 3.0‰). When observed by municipalities, the values of this demographic indicator vary significantly. At the end of the 20th century, all municipalities recorded a positive natural growth, but it was low in Nova Varoš (3.5‰), while relatively high in Tutin (16.4‰). In the following period, the natural growth rate decreased most rapidly in the municipalities of Nova Varoš, Priboj, and Prijepolje, and the values became negative. According to the latest data from 2022, the natural growth rate is still positive in municipalities with a Bosniak majority population. In the municipality of Sjenica, the natural growth rate is low (1.2‰), and moderate to high in the municipalities of Novi Pazar (8.2‰) and Tutin (10.8‰) (Table 2). These data indicate that the process of demographic transition in the southeastern part of the Raška region started later than in the northwest part of the region, as well as the rest of Serbia.

Changes in the ethnic structure of the Raška region

Multi-ethnicity, or heterogeneous ethnic structure, is an important factor in demographic processes in the Raška region. The ethnic structure of the region has been influenced by various historical, socio-economic, and political factors. In the period from 1991 to 2022, significant changes in the ethnic structure did not occur in the region. Unlike other parts of the former Yugoslavia, and even Serbia, this area was spared from war events and violent migrations. As a result, changes in the ethnic structure are the consequence of different natural movements and economic migrations of the population.

On the studied territory, three municipalities have consistently been predominantly inhabited by Serbian population during all censuses – Nova Varoš, Priboj, and Prijepolje. On the other hand, three municipalities in the southeastern part of the region are predominantly populated by Bosniak population – Tutin, Novi Pazar, and Sjenica. By analyzing the data on ethnic structure, it is noticed that there has been a decrease in the share of Serbian population in the region. The share of Serbs at the level of the entire region was 37.1% in 1991, and 26.8% in 2022. On the other hand, the share of Bosniak population increased from 60.3% to 64.8% . Looking at the absolute numbers, the number of Serbian population decreased from 89,396 to 62,478 for the period 2002 – 2022. The number of Bosniak population increased from 134,131 to 150,941 for the period 2002 – 2022. In the same period, the number of Muslim population decreased from 8,222 to 6,427. It should be noted that changes in this category occur due to demographic processes, but also due to different declarations of the population, i.e., subjective reasons. The share of population declaring themselves as Muslims in 2022 in the region is 2.7% (Table 3).

Analyzing the data at the municipal level, there is evident decrease both in absolute number and share of Serbian population for the last intercensal period 2011 – 2022 in all territorial units of the region. In 2022, the smallest share of Serbs in the region is in the municipality of

Tutin (2.1%), while the largest is in the municipality of Nova Varoš (88.1%). Accordingly, the largest share of Bosniak population in the region is precisely in the municipality of Tutin (92.0%), while the smallest is in the municipality of Nova Varoš (5.0%) (Table 3).

Table 3. Ethnic structure of the Raška region in 1991 and 2022

Municipality	1991									
	Serbs		Bosniaks		Muslims		Other		Unknown	
	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Број	%
Nova Varoš	19,284	88.4	/	/	1,857	8.5	632	2.9	39	0.2
Priboj	23,421	65.1	/	/	10,927	30.4	1,573	4.4	30	0.1
Prijepolje	24,770	53.2	/	/	20,200	43.4	1,513	3.3	42	0.1
Sjenica	7,546	22.4	/	/	25,633	76.1	425	1.3	77	0.2
Novi Pazar	19,064	22.4	/	/	64,251	75.4	1,665	2.0	269	0.3
Tutin	1,461	4.2	/	/	32,672	94.3	374	1.1	124	0.4
Raška region	95,546	37.1	/	/	155,540	60.3	6,182	2.4	581	0.2
Municipality	2022									
	Serbs		Bosniaks		Muslims		Other		Unknown	
	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%	Num.	%
Nova Varoš	11,901	88.1	673	5.0	308	2.3	276	2.0	349	2.6
Priboj	16,909	71.9	4,144	17.6	914	3.9	404	1.7	1,143	4.9
Prijepolje	14,961	46.4	12,842	39.9	1,945	6.0	766	2.4	1,700	5.3
Sjenica	3,861	16.0	17,665	73.4	1,069	4.4	381	1.6	1,107	4.6
Novi Pazar	14,142	13.3	85,204	79.8	1,851	1.7	1,732	1.6	3,791	3.6
Tutin	704	2.1	30,413	92.0	340	1.0	190	0.6	1,406	4.3
Raška region	62,478	26.8	150,941	64.8	6,427	2.8	3,749	1.6	9,496	4.1

Source: Попис становништва и домаћинстава СР Југославије 1991. године – Становништво према националној припадности. Национална припадност, књига 3. Савезни завод за статистику, Београд, 1993, Попис становништва, домаћинстава и станова 2022. Национална припадност по општинама и градовима, књига 1. Републички завод за статистику, Београд, 2023

The municipality of Novi Pazar, as the regional and economic center of the region, deserves special analysis. Approximately half of the total population of the region lives in its territory. Due to positive natural increase but also migration from other municipalities of the region, the number of Bosniak population constantly grows in Novi Pazar (2002 – 65,569; 2022 – 85,204). On the other hand, the number of Serbian population in the same period significantly decreased due to negative demographic processes (2002 – 20,465; 2022 – 13,251). The Serbian population in rural settlements of the municipality of Novi Pazar has a particularly unfavorable age structure, which contributes to the intensive process of depopulation.

CONCLUSION

Socio-geographical processes in the Raška region have played a significant role in shaping and directing geopolitical processes that have influenced not only Serbia but also the wider Balkan Peninsula. Contemporary geopolitical and demographic processes in the Raška region have a negative impact on the regional development of the region. Under the influence of these processes, there has been uneven distribution of population and economic objects in the region. This uneven relationship between natural potentials and population concentration has resulted in an intensive process of emptying rural areas and the "demographic dying" of a large

number of rural settlements in the region. In addition, there is an increase in the number of elderly and single households, which are also on the verge of extinction.

The peripheral geostrategic position of the region in Serbia, the proximity to Kosovo and Metohija as a politically unstable part of Serbia, weaker internal traffic connectivity, and distance from major international traffic routes have led to the regional development being greatly influenced by changes on the political, economic, military, and international level. Also, such geostrategic factors have put the Raška region in an unfavorable position for attracting foreign capital. However, the completion of the highway, whose route passes through the Pešter plateau, will significantly improve the traffic and economic position of the region. This will "open up" the area and connect it with neighboring regions (Central Serbia, Montenegro's mountainous region, and Montenegrin coast), resulting in faster economic development. All this will affect a more balanced regional development of the region and the inclusion of economically most underdeveloped parts in modern economic flows (development of agriculture, livestock farming, fruit growing, tourism, industry, etc.). In order to achieve a more balanced regional development, it is necessary to start and complete the production cycle at the regional level.

In modern geopolitical and demographic processes, the region whose main features are a complex and relatively unfavorable geostrategic position, economic underdevelopment, depopulation, emigration and heterogeneous ethno-demographic population structure has unfavorable conditions for faster socioeconomic progress. Due to the complex geopolitical and demographic reality, coordinated actions between different levels of government and social structures are necessary. In this way, existing challenges that limit its development would be adequately answered and natural and cultural-historical potentials would be used for faster and more even regional development.

REFERENCES

1. Влаховић П. (1997). Етнички процеси у областима Старе Рашке. Перспективе и проблеми привредног развоја Старе Рашке. Друштво Стара Рашка, Универзитетски савез за екологију и технологију, Београд, 25-32.
2. Гиговић Љ. (2010). Геополитички и геостратегијски значај Рашке области. Војно дело, 62 (1), 111-135.
3. Мишовић С., Ћурчић П. (1996). Топографија. Полицијска академија, Београд.
4. Павловић М., Мишовић С. (2007). Савремени географски процеси у Рашкој регији. Зборник радова Први конгрес српских географа (3), Српско географско друштво, Београд, 1033-1040.
5. Павловић М., Мишовић С. (2012). Улога Рашке регије у геополитичким процесима Србије. Проблеми и изазови савремене географске науке и наставе – међународни научни скуп, Универзитет у Београду, Географски факултет, Београд, 73-84.
6. Павловић М. (2019). Географске регије Србије 2 – Планинско-котлинско-долинска макрорегија. Универзитет у Београду – Географски факултет, Београд.
7. Петровић М. (1997). Неке могућности привредног развоја Старе Рашке. Перспективе и проблеми привредног развоја Старе Рашке. Друштво Стара Рашка, Универзитетски савез за екологију и технологију, Београд, 79-84.

8. *** (1993). Попис становништва и домаћинстава СР Југославије 1991. године – Становништво према националној припадности. Национална припадност, књига 3. Савезни завод за статистику, Београд.
9. *** (2003). Попис становништва, домаћинстава и станова 2002. Становништво, Национална или етничка припадност, подаци по насељима, књига 1. Републички завод за статистику, Београд.
10. *** (2012). Попис становништва, домаћинстава и станова 2011. у Републици Србији. Национална припадност по општинама и градовима, књига 1. Републички завод за статистику, Београд.
11. *** (2023). Попис становништва, домаћинстава и станова 2022. Национална припадност по општинама и градовима, књига 1. Републички завод за статистику, Београд.
12. https://data.stat.gov.rs (Accessed: 5.3.2024)