

IS SPANISH RURAL DEPOPULATION IRREVERSIBLE? RECENT CHANGES IN THE POST-ECONOMIC CRISIS PERIOD

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1. Introduction

In contrast to the strong demographic growth that Spain experienced throughout the 20th century –increasing from 18.6 million inhabitants in 1900 to 40.5 million people in 2001– its rural municipalities showed, as a whole, a significant population loss. This is the so-called Spanish “rural exodus”, which, despite beginning in the 19th century and lasting for most of the 20th century, was particularly intense in the 1960s and 1970s (Collantes and Pinilla, 2019). In that period, urban areas (particularly Madrid and Barcelona, but also other large cities and, in general, provincial capitals) and industrial areas or those where the tourism industry developed, experienced sky-rocketing population growth, due to the arrival of internal migration. At the same time, rural interior areas, and particularly the smallest municipalities, progressively lost population. Since then, its dwindling population has been characterized by ageing and masculinization. Therefore, it can be deduced that municipality size is a key factor both in the offer of services and in the capacity of a municipality to reproduce itself and survive (Pujadas and Bayona, 2019). In the Spanish case, small municipalities dominate its municipal structure. More than 60% of the municipalities have less than 1000 inhabitants, containing around a million and a half people, 3.1% of the Spanish population, although they occupy 40% of the country’s territory (Recaño, 2017). In fact, in sparsely populated rural areas, natural increase and net internal migration are both mostly negative; therefore, foreign migration is the main determinant of population change (Collantes et al., 2014; Bayona and Gil-Alonso, 2013). Indeed, many rural municipalities experienced renewed growth during the first decade of the 21st century (Gil-Alonso and Bayona, 2021; Camarero, 2020), due to the massive arrival of foreign immigrants. As a consequence of this international inflow, Spanish population rose to 47 million people in 2010. However, the Great Recession put an end to this trend –Spain lost around half a million inhabitants–, particularly in the case of rural municipalities, which resumed its traditional demographic decline. Presently, we ask ourselves on the demographic impact of the new economic growth phase –also called the “post-crisis” period and lasting from 2014 to the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic–, on Spanish rural municipalities. Do they, generally, regain population? Do some regain it, while others continue to lose it? Which are the geographical factors contributing to the demographic revitalization of (some) Spanish rural areas and which to rural depopulation? This paper intends to answer these questions and verify whether the post-crisis period (2014-2020) demographic changes in Spanish rural municipalities resemble pre-2008 economic expansion period ones, or the intense economic crisis ones (2009-2013). If this latter hypothesis were correct, it would mean that, in general, Spanish rural areas continue to be regressive.

2. Data and methodology

2000-2020 *Padrón continuo* (local register) microdata, have been used as the main source to study stocks. Demographic changes in rural municipalities –a concept that, in Spain,

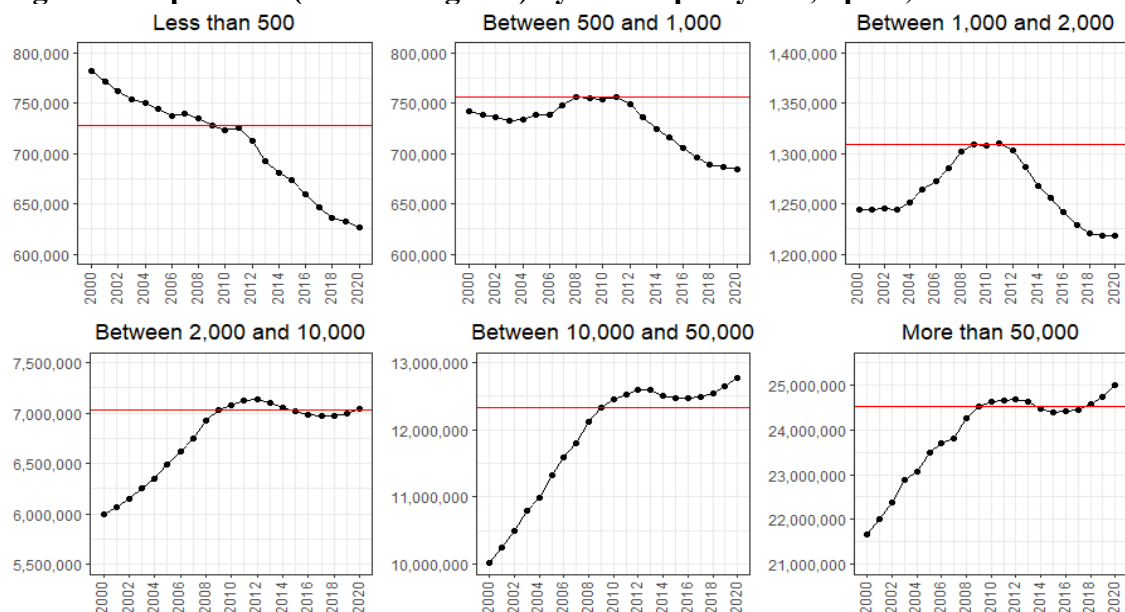
applies to municipalities under 2000 inhabitants (that means that villages grouped in municipalities that exceed this threshold are not included, which is relevant in Galicia and Asturias, in northwestern Spain)— during the post-crisis period are compared to those occurring in the economic expansion and crisis phases. In addition, birth and death figures have also been used to calculate natural increase. Finally, net migration is estimated using the demographic balancing equation, in other words, by subtracting natural increase from total population growth.

The 5,678 municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants in 2009 have been classified according to their demographic growth during the 21st century. To this end, two series of growth rates have been calculated: a first set between 2001-2009, prior to the effects of the economic crisis and, a second one, between 2009-2020, which covers the economic crisis and post-crisis years. Then, these rates have been used to classify municipalities into nine categories, depending on whether their growth was negative, stable, or positive in the first period and in the second one, giving rise to nine different combinations. Those municipalities where rates were between -0.1% and 0.1%, have been considered as stable.

3. Results: recent population changes in rural municipalities

Spanish population diminished, to a greater or smaller extent, during the economic crisis in the six groups of municipalities appearing in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Population (absolute figures) by municipality size, Spain, 2000-2020



Source: *Padrón continuo* (local register), INE

For categories containing the most populated municipalities (>10,000 inhabitants), population loss was only temporary, and this diminution is relatively small, as figures quickly recover and surpass 2009 ones (indicated by a red line). However, villages with less than 2000 inhabitants lost much more population and did not recover 2009 figures during the post-crisis period. In fact, they do not grow once again. Population has been stable, these last three years, in municipalities between 1000 and 2000 inhabitants, while, in those under 1000 inhabitants, it has continued to diminish.

Table 1 and Figure 2 present a typology of municipalities under 2000 inhabitants according to whether their population increased or diminished in the two periods analysed before and after January 1st, 2009. The map in Figure 3 allows to locate them within

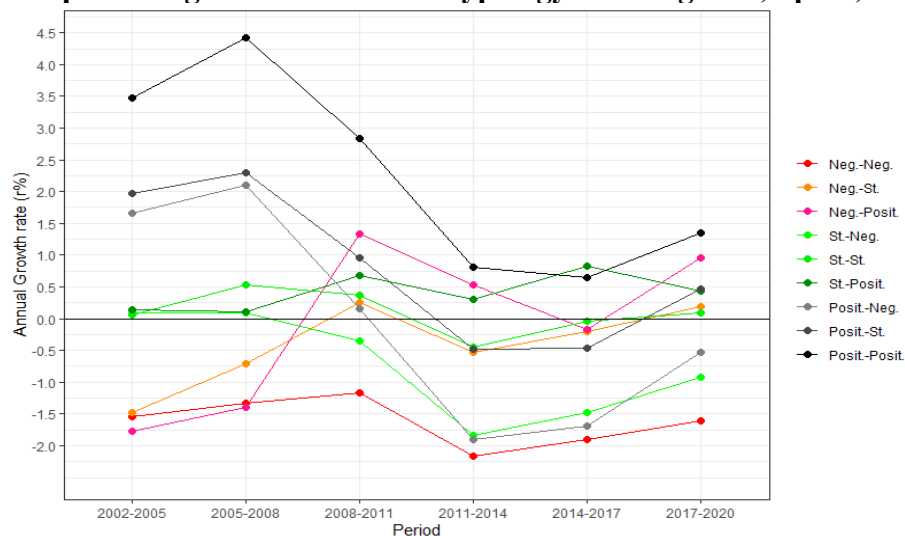
Spain. The ++ and += groups contain 708 municipalities, the most demographically dynamic. They experienced a strong increase during expansion years, weak growth or decrease during the economic crisis period, and regained positive growth during the post-crisis. They are mainly peri-urban villages –situated either near urban and metropolitan areas (Madrid and Barcelona, but also in the Basque Country) or around most provincial capitals–, or tourist-oriented municipalities placed in coastal areas (Costa Brava, Costa del Sol) or in the Pyrenees or other mountain ranges. Some villages devoted to the agro-industry in the provinces of Lleida, Valencia, Almeria, and La Rioja, are also included.

Table 1. Typology of rural municipalities grouped by population growth before and after 2009 (9 categories), Spain, 2001-2020

Typology		Mun. (<2,000)	Mun. (total)	% Mun.	Population (2020)	Population (mean)	Total Growth	Relative Growth
Negative-Negative	(--)	3,232	3,609	89.6	1,105,064	342	-404,369	-1.63
Negative-Stable	(-=)	59	74	79.7	21,073	357	-1,958	-0.47
Negative-Positive	(-+)	230	238	96.6	52,257	227	-1,592	-0.16
Stable-Negative	(=-)	141	203	69.5	79,913	567	-11,665	-0.71
Stable-Stable	(==)	7	11	63.6	6,471	924	5	0.00
Stable-Positive	(=+)	23	28	82.1	9,357	407	611	0.36
Positive-Negative	(+ -)	1,278	1,966	65.0	656,276	514	1,527	0.01
Positive-Stable	(+=)	108	273	39.6	79,170	733	11,244	0.81
Positive-Positive	(++)	600	1,588	37.8	518,290	864	179,785	2.27

Source: *Padrón continuo* (local register), INE

Figure 2. Population growth rates of the typology's 9 categories, Spain, 2002-2020

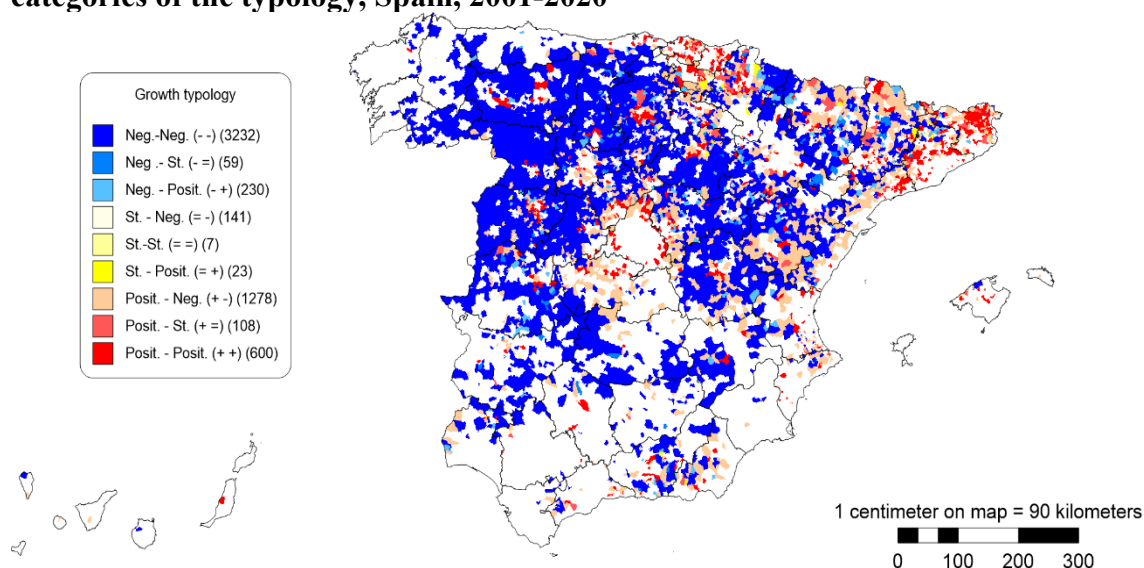


Source: *Padrón continuo* (local register), INE

At the opposite end of the scale there are the 3,662 municipalities belonging to --, -=, -+, and =- groups. They are the most regressive population categories, in which many municipalities lost population even during the most economically and demographically dynamic years before the Great Recession. These villages are mainly situated inland, more specifically in the Central Plateau (*Meseta central*) and interior mountains, and away from urban areas and coastal tourist ones.

The three remaining categories (==, =+ and +-) contain 1308 municipalities in an intermediate situation, both from a population growth (population is mostly stable) and from a geographical perspective. Indeed, these municipalities are mainly either located not far from metropolitan areas (outer suburban areas), in pre-coastal areas, in the Pyrenees or in relatively well-connected inland areas.

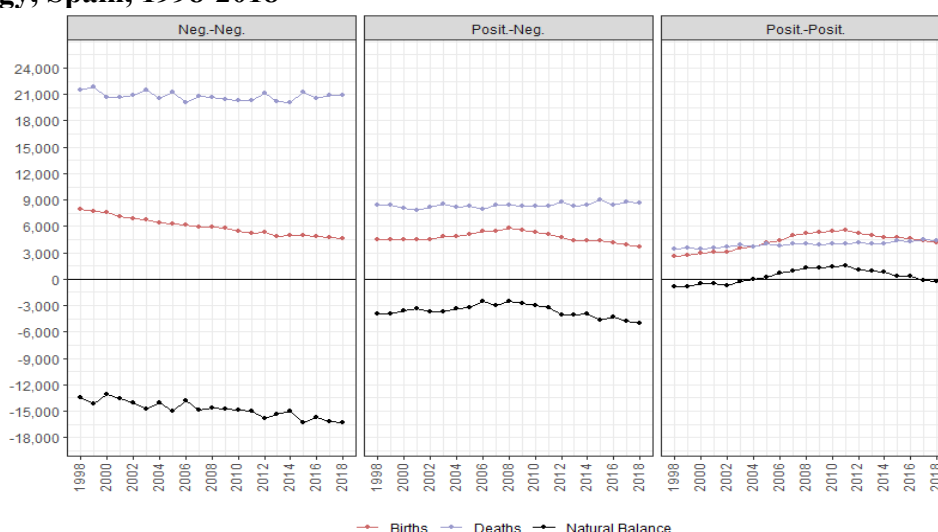
Figure 3. Geographical distribution of the rural municipalities grouped by the 9 categories of the typology, Spain, 2001-2020



Source: *Padrón continuo* (local register), INE

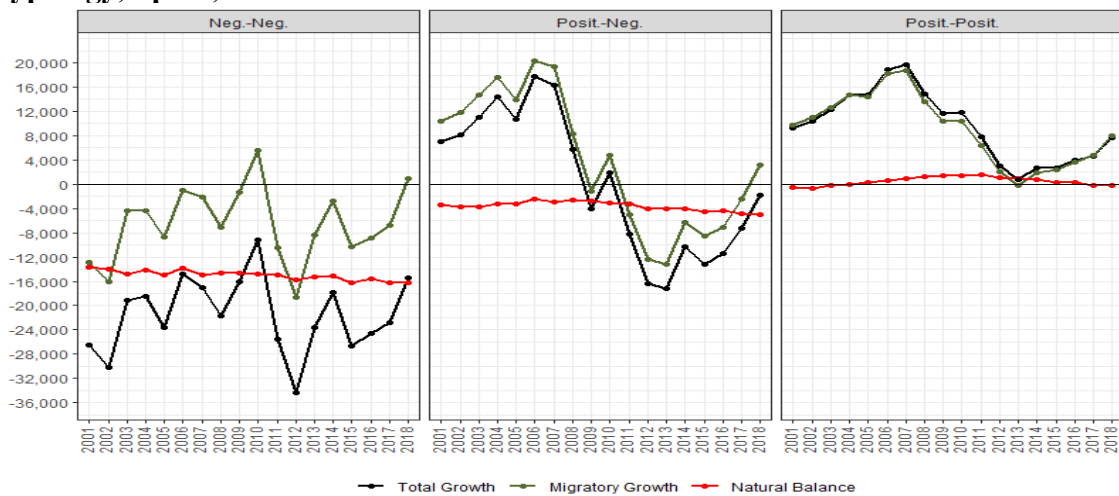
In general, natural increase is negative in all rural areas, as there are more deaths than births. However, in the most dynamic groups of municipalities –such as the ++ category ones– natural increase was positive in the final economic expansion years and the first economic crisis ones (figure 4). By contrast, in the - - category municipalities, natural increase was always strongly and increasingly negative, with hardly any variations throughout the different phases of the economic cycle. It is also the category showing the most negative net migration values during the economic crisis years, and even in almost all the economic expansion phase years (figure 5). At the opposite side of the scale, in ++ category municipalities, net migration was always positive, even when Spain lost population. On their side, municipalities in the + = category lost population due to migration during the economic crisis years and the first post-crisis ones, though their net migration figures were already positive in 2018.

Figure 4. Births, deaths, and natural growth for a selection of categories of the typology, Spain, 1998-2018



Source: births and deaths data, INE

Figure 5. Total, natural, and migratory growth for a selection of categories of the typology, Spain, 2001-2018



Source: *Padrón continuo* (local register), and births and deaths data, INE

5. Conclusions

In a scenario where natural increase has been negative for many decades, migration flows determine demographic changes in Spanish rural municipalities. And migration, and therefore demographic growth, is extremely sensitive to economic fluctuations. The 2008 economic crisis put an end to the demographic recovery phase that Spanish rural municipalities had experienced during the strong economic growth period prior to the Great Recession. In those years, these villages grew because of positive net international migration. Only municipalities with less than 500 inhabitants lost population throughout all the analysed periods, that is to say, both in the crisis and the economic growth phases. And what about the post-crisis? During that period, 853 rural municipalities gained population, as a consequence of economic recovery, but 4651, that is, the vast majority, still had regressive population trends, while 174 showed stagnant figures. These results demonstrate that rural demographic dynamics mainly depend on demographic size –the smaller the size of the population, the more regressive its demographic behaviour– and on the village’s geographical location: only rural municipalities located in (outer) suburbs near metropolitan or urban areas, and in pre-coastal or mountain tourist areas, gained population in the post-crisis period. The rest –the vast majority–, continued to depopulate.

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