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

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.

Many rural municipalities—a concept that, in Spain, applies to municipalities under 2000 inhabitants—experienced renewed growth during the first decade of the 21st century due to the massive arrival of foreign immigrants.

However, the Great Recession put an end to this trend, particularly in the case of rural municipalities, which resumed its traditional pattern of demographic decline.

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

Data and Methodology

2000-2020 Padrón continuo (local register) microdata, have been used as the main source to study stocks.

The 5,678 municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants in 2009 have been classified according to their demographic growth before and after January 1st, 2009: between 2000-2009 (expansion) and 2009-2020 (economic crisis and post-crisis years).

A typology of municipalities under 2000 inhabitants is constructed according to whether their population increased or diminished in the two periods analysed before and after January 1st, 2009: between 2000-2009 (expansion) and 2009-2020 (economic crisis and post-crisis years).

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

Geographical distribution of the rural municipalities grouped the typology's 9 categories, Spain, 2001-2020

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.

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.

For most rural municipalities, demographic recovery is very difficult: low density, few inhabitants, negative natural growth, advanced ageing and residential instability of the immigrant population.