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

Fernando Gil-Alonso, Departament de Geografia, Universitat de Barcelona, fgil@ub.edu
Jordi Bayona-i-Carrasco, Departament de Geografia, Universitat de Barcelona, and Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics, jordibayona@ub.edu
Isabel Pujadas-Rúbies, Departament de Geografia, Universitat de Barcelona, ipujadas@ub.edu

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

- The 5,678 municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants in 2000-2020 have been classified according to their demographic growth before and after 2009 (9 categories), 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 2000 have been classified according to their demographic growth during the 21st century.
- Birth and death figures have been used to calculate natural increase. Net migration is estimated using the demographic balancing equation.

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)

Typology of rural municipalities grouped by population growth before and after 2009 (9 categories), Spain, 2000-2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive-Up</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>794,744</td>
<td>1,071,906</td>
<td>277,162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable-Up</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21,829</td>
<td>24,900</td>
<td>3,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable-Stable</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3,647</td>
<td>3,756</td>
<td>1,092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable-Negative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive-Negative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,841</td>
<td>1,073</td>
<td>-768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable-Negative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22,770</td>
<td>23,282</td>
<td>512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative-Stable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,280</td>
<td>20,737</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative-Bi</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5,764</td>
<td>6,108</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative-4Bi</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21,920</td>
<td>22,428</td>
<td>508</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

- By contrast, in the -- category villages, 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.

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.