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Depopulation and Land Use Changes in Serbia: Challenges and Perspectives in the 21st Century

Since the late 20th century, Serbia has experienced a continuous population decline. Census data from 1991 already indicate a negative demographic trend in all regions of Serbia, except for the Belgrade region (excluding Kosovo and Metohija). Certain municipalities deviate from this trend due to a positive natural population increase (Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin) or a positive migration balance (Novi Sad, Belgrade). However, these cases represent exceptions rather than the dominant demographic processes in the country. Research has shown that depopulation has direct environmental implications, including changes in soil erosion intensity, the frequency of flash floods, and pollution levels. Several studies in Serbia have analyzed the impact of demographic changes on land use and land cover (LULC) transformations, particularly in urban areas (Belgrade, Novi Sad – Futog), forest ecosystems (South Banat District), agricultural land and erosion-prone areas (the Velika Morava and South Morava river basins), and in abandoned rural settlements in western, southern, and eastern Serbia. Additionally, studies have examined LULC changes at the national level without directly considering the effects of depopulation. Findings indicate a correlation between demographic decline and LULC changes. However, besides depopulation, various socio-economic factors also influence these transformations and should be considered in further analyses. Notably, Vojvodina, Serbia's traditional agricultural region, remains underrepresented in existing research, despite the potential significance of studying LULC changes in this area. Understanding LULC dynamics and their relationship with demographic processes is a crucial step toward effective spatial planning and sustainable development.

Keywords: Depopulation, land use/land cover changes, rural abandonment, environmental impact