

Bulgaria's Demographic Crisis: Underlying Causes and Some Short-Term Implications

ROSSEN VASSILEV
Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

This article explores the major reasons for the population implosion in Bulgaria, a Southeast European country that is said to be threatened with “demographic death.” Bulgaria has the lowest total fertility rate (TFR) ever recorded for a European country in peacetime—just 1.09 births per woman per lifetime in 2003. It is also the country with the lowest TFR in the world. What is particularly worrying is that the national fertility level has dropped well below the replacement level, which is 2.1–2.2 children per woman per lifetime. If that catastrophic rate persists, each new generation of Bulgarians will be only about half the size of the preceding one. Because such a dramatic change in the demographic characteristics of a country cannot be without serious economic, social, and political consequences for its future, this article also explores some implications of Bulgaria's disastrous situation in the field of demographics.

Introduction

In a 1999 report of its Committee on Migration, Refugees and Demography, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe noted with “deep concern” the recent population drop in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe:

The enormous political, economic and social changes which have taken place in central and eastern Europe since the end of the 1980s have had a significant demographic impact. Some of the demographic trends noted in these countries in the course of the last decade are a cause for deep concern: falling population in absolute figures, decline in life expectancy, drop in the fertility rate, higher mortality rate, aging of the population, deterioration of the health situation (Council of Europe 1999).

As a group, the East-Central European countries now have the lowest fertility rate in the world (Council of Europe 2003).¹ Partly as a result of the demographic trends of its eastern half, average life expectancy at birth in all of Europe has declined for the first time since World War Two (UN/ECE

1999).² Falling longevity is the direct outcome of East-Central Europe's continuing social and economic problems, such as stagnant living standards, low real incomes, high poverty rates, unemployment, growing social inequality, environmental pollution, and a healthcare crisis that has resulted in untreated disease and early death, especially among the elderly and the poor. At the very time that these countries are experiencing high morbidity and mortality rates, including high infant mortality rates,³ they are also losing population due to a "brain drain" among the young and most talented people, who are departing in increasing numbers for greener pastures abroad. Such an exodus cannot but result in even bigger economic and social problems down the road. The admission of some of these countries to membership in the European Union (EU) may in fact make the problem of emigration and the loss of "the best and the brightest" even worse than it is now (Horvat 2004).

That the countries of East-Central Europe are losing population is indisputable. For example, the 2000 censuses in Estonia and Latvia revealed that the populations of these two Baltic states had fallen 11-12 percent since 1991 (*RFE/RL Newslines*, November 7, 2002). That the regionwide trend of shrinking populations will continue is also beyond dispute. In a 2003 study, the United Nations predicted that the population of East European countries such as Bulgaria and Latvia would decrease by as much as 50 percent by the middle of this century. At less than 1.3 children per woman per lifetime, East-Central Europe has the lowest fertility level in the world—even worse than the dangerously low 1.6 average of Western Europe (Markovic 2001).

The intent of this article is to explore the major reasons for the population implosion in Bulgaria, the nation that seems to be the worst afflicted demographically in post-Communist Eastern Europe. Bulgaria is even said to be threatened with "demographic death" (Shishkov 1997; Slavov 2004). Between 1990 and 1998, the country's birth rate declined by more than 35 percent, the death rate increased by 15 percent, and the general fertility rate decreased by 37 percent (UNDP 2004a).⁴ Bulgaria has the lowest total fertility rate (TFR) ever recorded for a European country in peacetime—just 1.09 births per woman per lifetime in 2003. It has replaced Italy—until recently the symbol of Europe's future depopulation—as the country with the lowest TFR in the world.⁵ What is particularly worrying is that the national fertility level has dropped well below the replacement level, which is 2.1-2.2 children per woman per lifetime. If that catastrophic rate persists, each new generation in Bulgaria will be only about half the size of the preceding one. Even though Bulgaria's extremely low annual fertility is hardly an exception in Europe, such a dramatic change in the demographic characteristics of a country cannot be without serious economic, social, and political consequences for its future. This article will therefore explore briefly some short-term implications of Bulgaria's disastrous situation in the field of demographics, which is affecting the country and indeed the entire East-Central European region.

Bulgaria's Demographic Profile

Bulgaria is listed in all recent reports of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) as the East European nation with the largest

negative population growth rate (a negative rate of natural increase means that the death rate is higher than the birth rate). The country has been plunged into a severe demographic crisis ever since its absolute population total began to fall in the late 1980s. Due to its negative natural growth of minus 5.1 per 1,000 population, Bulgaria is now undergoing one of the most severe peacetime population declines in history. That the country is sharply regressive in demographic terms is, statistically speaking, due to the combination of a negative reproductive rate, a high mortality rate, and growing emigration. When the discredited and financially bankrupt Communist regime collapsed at the end of 1989, so did fertility levels. Since 1997 Bulgaria has registered the world's lowest level of fertility: its total fertility rate plummeted from an average of 2.2 births in 1975-- 1980 to an average of just 1.09 births in 1997-2004, equaling and even falling below that of Latvia.

Not only has the Bulgarian population stopped reproducing itself, but average life expectancy has declined by almost four years since the late 1980s, and is now 70.9 years. Men's life expectancy is only 67.1 years (8 years less than the EU average), and women's is 74.4 years (one consequence of this gender-based discrepancy in life expectancy is that there were 1,060 women for every 1,000 men in 2004). In turn, average healthy-life expectancy at birth has declined by six years since 1990, and at 64.6 years is among the lowest in Europe. Men's average healthy-life expectancy is only 62.5 years (a decrease of 7 years since 1990), and women's is 66.8 years (a decrease of 5 years since 1990) (WHO 2004).⁶

At 8.02 per 1,000 population in 2003 (compared to 16.0 per 1,000 in 1970 and 14.5 per 1,000 in 1980), Bulgaria has the lowest birth rate in Europe, even though the mean age of Bulgarian women giving birth to their first child is actually very low--just 22.80 years in 1997 and below 24 years in 2004. The country also has one of Europe's highest mortality rates, 14.48 per 1,000 population in 2003, compared to just 9.0 per 1,000 in 1970 (CIA 2003). The infant mortality rate of 21.31 per 1,000 live births (a 2004 estimate) is more than twice the EU average. The natural growth rate of minus 10.9 per 1,000 population (which means that there are today about 109 deaths for every 100 live births) is the worst recorded for peacetime Europe. Its excess mortality of close to 50,000 people each year is calamitous for the country, given the small size of its population (in comparison, the Russian Federation which has a far larger total population of 143 million is losing around 600,000-850,000 people per year). The population replacement rate for 1996 was 0.58 (a rate of 1.0 signifies population replacement). This is far below the "fertility replacement level" of 2.1--2.2 children born per woman per lifetime, which is necessary to prevent further population losses (BTA 1997a). Such a negative "net reproduction rate" (NRR) means that the next generation of Bulgarians, under the present patterns of childbearing and survival, would be about 42 percent smaller than the current one (that is, the generation of their parents). Only Russia's equally disastrous NRR of 0.59 recorded in 2001 comes close (see Eberstadt 2003; Eberstadt 2005; Goble 2004).

Crude marriage rates have decreased sharply, while crude divorce rates have risen, which means that young Bulgarians are now much less

likely to marry than their parents and are more likely to divorce if married. These trends undercut the prospects for increasing the national fertility level--at least for the near future. The rate at which Bulgarians marry decreased from 7.9 per 1,000 population in 1980 to 4.4 per 1,000 population in 1995. The number of marriages in 2001 fell 2.5 times compared to 1970. There were nearly 15,000 divorces in 2004, an increase of 22 percent compared to 2003. With more than a third of all marriages ending in divorce, the number of families dropped by 170,000 in 1999--2001 alone. Due to the worsening divorce ratio, the number of single parents increased sixfold from 1985 to 2001. As a result, over 46 percent of the Bulgarian newborn were born out of wedlock in 2004, compared to only 8.5 percent in 1970 (Standart 2004a and 2004b). Another consequence of increased childbearing outside of marriage is that the growing cohort of illegitimate children is being raised mostly by single mothers in conditions of poverty, neglect, and disrepute.

Less than half of Bulgarian women today are between the reproductive ages of 15 and 49. The number of live births declined from more than 138,000 in 1970 to 89,134 in 1992, 72,188 in 1996, and about 68,000 in 2001 (Pari 1999, SNA 2004). More than 200,000 married couples--11 percent of Bulgarians between the ages of 18 and 40--cannot have children, owing in great part to the effects of frequent abortions, rampant sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), and an inability to pay for expensive infertility treatments (Standart 2004a). The growing problem of involuntary infertility/sterility renders it even less likely that the country's fertility decline can be easily reversed. Real income losses, especially among young families, the high unemployment rate, and pessimistic expectations of future prosperity have all contributed to one-child families becoming the norm in Bulgaria. As a result, the number of first-graders has dropped by more than 200,000, or more than 15 percent since 1990.

Bulgaria's population was 8.8 million in 1986 (when it seems to have crested), 8.3 million in 1992, and 7.9 million in 2001 (see Table 1). As a consequence of the prevailing demographic trends, the current population of 7.7 million (a 2004 estimate) is expected to fall to 6.9 million by the year 2020, raising fears about the "physical survival" of the Bulgarian nation (see Shishkov 1997). The World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank estimate that Bulgaria's population in 2050 will be only 5.8 million (Markovic 2001), which would be a loss of 3 million people since 1986. A more pessimistic demographic projection predicts that Bulgaria's population will fall to 6 million by 2025 and 4.5 million by 2050 (PRB 2003).

Table 1: Bulgaria's total population and ethnic group populations (based on the results of the March 1, 2001 official census)

Ethnicity	Population	Percent
Bulgarians	6,655,210	83.9
Turks	746,664	9.4
Roma	370,908	4.7
Others	156,119	2.0
Total	7,928,901	100.0

Source: Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute (2001).

A total of 900,000 mostly young people emigrated from Bulgaria between 1990 and 2004, contributing to the downward population trend (NSI 2004). Some 2.5 million Bulgarians have already applied for foreign visas with the intention (whether openly stated or not) to settle permanently abroad. The negative migration rate of minus 4.9 migrants for 1,000 population (a 2001 estimate) will further reduce the size of the country's future population. Given the country's continuing economic, financial, and social ills, out-migration is likely to increase, especially if Bulgaria is admitted into the EU. According to the Ministry of Social Welfare, a recent opinion survey showed that over 2.1 million Bulgarians are ready to depart for Western Europe as soon as Bulgaria is admitted into the EU in January 2007 and work permits become available. Only 58 percent of the respondents in the same survey indicated they plan to remain in Bulgaria after the country's EU entry (Yonchev 2005b).

Due to the extreme sub-replacement fertility rate, population aging, or "graying," is also accelerating. Only 15 percent of Bulgarians are now under fifteen years of age, 37 percent are under thirty, 31 percent are over fifty, and 17 percent are over sixty-five (a 2004 estimate). At the end of 2004, only 1.17 million Bulgarians were under the age of 16, a decrease of over 35,000 compared to the previous year. The average age has increased from 32.4 years in 1960 to 38.7 years in 1995 (Popova 1996: 2), and now stands at 41 years (Kiuchukov 2005)--one of the highest in the world. Bulgaria also has to contend with a sharp drop in its young adult population. In 2001, for example, there were only 1.15 million Bulgarians between the ages of 20 and 29 years. If the present demographic trends remain unchanged, the members of this pivotal age group will fall to less than one million by 2011, and to 670,000 by 2021 (Yonchev 2004), fulfilling the predictions of a future population collapse and possibly resulting in manpower shortages.

In 1997, Bulgaria had 2.4 million elderly people and only 3.5 million people of economically active age, which means that there were 70 retirees for every 100 adults of working age. By 2002, there were already 108 retirees for every 100 working adults (Yonchev 2005a).⁷ Such changes in the age structure and the "dependency ratio" of the Bulgarian population threaten to bankrupt the already troubled national social insurance system (BTA 1997b). There will be equally negative consequences for Bulgaria's future per-capita GDP, worker productivity, and output capabilities, since the younger members of the economically active population are the ones who have the best skills, training and qualifications required for national growth in the new globalized economy.

Bulgaria's "Demographic Shock"

What has led to such a population hemorrhage, the level of which is matched only by countries scourged by natural disaster, famine, or war? As mentioned above, the trend of negative population growth is largely determined by the collapse of the fertility level and the dramatic increase in both the emigration and mortality rates of the population. But these three demographic variables are in turn affected by larger socioeconomic forces.

Bulgaria's depopulation trajectory has all the markings of what is sometimes called a "demographic shock." A "demographic shock" is the demographic consequence of an epochal event or series of events--such as, for example, the abrupt and tumultuous transition from one political and socioeconomic system to another--leading to political and economic turbulence, social stress, direct and indirect (structural) violence, rampant crime, and profound personal insecurity.⁸

Bulgaria's painful transition from a centrally-planned economy to market-oriented capitalism has produced a historic upheaval accompanied by many economic and social ills, such as the "shock therapy" decontrol of prices, the elimination of government subsidies for food, housing, healthcare, transport, and energy (upon which many Bulgarians have traditionally relied for survival), a decline in agricultural and food production, and the slashing--or total abolition--of many social benefits and services, including free and universal medical care and education (Vassilev 2003). The sharp increases in unemployment and inflation have resulted in a dramatic decline in real incomes and the loss of bank savings, particularly among the unemployed, pensioners, the sick, the disabled, and families with young children (Vassilev 2004b). A drastic rise in food prices has led to an increasing proportion of household incomes being spent on food as well as a related growth in illnesses linked to unhealthy diets, nutritional deficiencies, and malnutrition (Cockerham 1999: 211-225). Between 1991 and 1994 alone, the cost of food rose 239.5 percent, including the tripling of the price of milk (Cockerham 1999: 224). The real purchasing power of the population has declined now to just 30 percent of what it was in 1990 (Standart 2005b). According to Ekaterina Katardjieva, an economic expert of the Independent Trade Union *Podkrepa*, five million Bulgarians or 75 percent of the population live at a bare subsistence level (Dimitrova 2004). According to the UNDP, the social cost of the transition in Bulgaria has been one of the worst in all of East-Central Europe (UNDP 2004a).

The demographic consequences of such traumatic sociostructural changes have been immediate and profound. It is clear that Bulgaria's population crisis is a direct result of economic distress. Even though the transition process has been accompanied by significant gains for the population in terms of democratic freedoms and civil and political rights, a great many of Bulgarians have experienced a decline in their general quality of life due to decreasing real incomes, high unemployment, greater inequality, personal insecurity, and mounting poverty. The crime rate, especially the violent crime rate, has also risen dramatically since the fall of Communism, as law enforcement and social cohesion and solidarity have weakened. In 1989 the number of recorded crimes was only 663 per 100,000 population, but this figure more than quadrupled to 2,898 per 100,000 population by 1997 (UNDP 2004a).

The severe economic slump of the 1990s has lowered the national level of socio-economic development and the standard of living to that of a typical Third World country (Vassilev 2003). Following the precipitous decline in economic production in terms of GNP and per-capita GNP, Bulgaria's living standards have plummeted and poverty has increased. A third of all Bulgarian households were already classified as poor in 1993,

compared to only 2 percent in 1987-1988 (Wyzan 1996). According to more recent household survey data, nearly three-fourths of the population now lives at or below the official poverty line. Plamen Dimitrov, vice-president of Bulgaria's largest trade-union confederation KNSB, recently reported that at least 40 percent of Bulgarians live "in extreme poverty" (AFP, November 1, 2002). The sense of absolute and relative deprivation among the newly impoverished is all the more devastating, because a majority of them have never experienced unemployment or poverty (Wyzan 1996). The sudden impoverishment of so many people has increased the level of psychological stress and existential anxiety experienced in the daily life of ordinary Bulgarians. According to Dr. Konstantin Trenchev, the leader of the Independent Trade Union *Podkrepa*, "[a]t the moment the real incomes of Bulgarians are so low that they can barely meet--by hook or by crook--their biological needs" (Standart 2004c).

Another negative consequence of such widespread impoverishment is the growing incidence of tuberculosis and anemia, two diseases of poverty and malnutrition believed to have been eradicated in postwar Bulgaria. The number of TB cases has more than doubled since 1990, as 6 out of every 10,000 Bulgarians were diagnosed with the disease in 2002, according to the 2003 Human Development Report (UNDP 2004b). As early as 1996, the National Center of Hygiene found protein deficiency in 20 percent of all school-age Bulgarians. At a healthcare seminar held in June 2004, Dr. Alexander Simidjiev reported that, using the more stringent health standards of the World Health Organization, 90 percent of Bulgarians suffer from some form of disease (Uzanicheva 2004a). The state of health of the Bulgarian population has deteriorated and is clearly more problematic now than it was just a generation ago. In other words, the successive birth cohorts of Bulgarians born after 1989 will be less healthy than their parents. Such deteriorating public-health conditions are exacerbated by the fact that nearly half of Bulgarians rely on herbal treatment and other alternative medicine, given the rising costs of medical doctors and of medicinal drugs (Haralampieva and Zlatinova 2004; Uzanicheva 2005). At least two million Bulgarians are without any health insurance coverage, according to Dr. Ivan Bukarev, head of the national health insurance administration (Uzanicheva 2004b).

Since annual per-capita GNP is an unreliable empirical indicator of the physical quality of life, the UNDP has devised the so-called Human Development Index (HDI),⁹ which has the advantage of greater validity in indicating real levels of socioeconomic development than per-capita GNP income. The annual human development reports published by the UNDP ranked Bulgaria 27th in the world in 1990, 33rd in 1991, 48th in 1994, 69th in 1997, and 56th in 2003, downgrading its human development status from high to medium. This precipitous drop in HDI ranking is attributable to the sharply lower purchasing power of the population, as well as the decline in life expectancy at birth (which even the highly questionable official statistics released by the Bulgarian authorities cannot hide). These and other data leave no doubt that Bulgaria has experienced a socioeconomic retrogression that is among the worst on record in post-Communist East-Central Europe, leading directly to the current trend of negative population growth.

Some Short-Term Consequences

It is remarkable that the various post-Communist Bulgarian cabinets have done very little to try to reverse the demographic catastrophe unfolding in their country (see Slavov 2004). Some of the negative implications from this demographic trend are already obvious. On April 2, 2004, Bulgaria was admitted with much fanfare to NATO membership along with five other formerly Communist states. But the country's dramatic population decline and persistent financial woes have sharply curtailed what it can contribute to the military capabilities and numerical strength of the North Atlantic alliance. From its peak of 152,000 men under arms in 1988, when Bulgaria was still a member of the now defunct Warsaw Pact, the Bulgarian armed forces have fallen in size to their current number of about 45,000, which is to be further reduced to 39,000 servicemen and servicewomen by 2015 (Serafimova and Yonchev 2004).¹⁰ Given Bulgaria's predicted demographic collapse during the next few decades—along with the planned abolition of the draft and the switch to all-volunteer armed forces—that number can be expected to plunge even further, making it all but inevitable that the country will be forced to rely completely on NATO protection for its future self-defense.¹¹ It is also doubtful that the Bulgarian military will be able to contribute any significant number of troops for future peace-keeping operations—as it has recently done in missions in some of the world's hotspots such as Cambodia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq (where Bulgaria currently has 480 peace-keeping troops).

The demographic crisis is equally relevant to Bulgaria's prospective EU membership. The country is scheduled to become a full member of the EU on January 1, 2007. In addition to numerous other critical problems and drawbacks, Bulgaria's population decline and shrinking consumer market make it less attractive or suitable as a future member of the EU, because its less than competitive national economy is unprepared for equal participation in the European common market and will become even more uncompetitive in the future. When it joins the EU, Bulgaria will be the nation with the highest death rate and largest natural population loss among all member states. By stifling local demand, the country's below-replacement fertility, negative natural growth, and aging population (more than 1.8 million estimated pensioners in 2004) may also depress the rates of domestic consumption, employment, and foreign direct investment (FDI) to such an extent that not even international trade and European integration will be able to make up for these weaknesses, making the country more a burden than an equal partner to other EU members.

For a country generally lacking in natural resources, land, and other "physical capital," the deterioration of its "human capital," especially the declining number of its young, better educated, and most productive citizens, has become another obstacle to rapid and sustained economic development, pushing it further to the periphery of the international economy. Bulgaria's health and population problems are thus eroding its human resource base, upon which the potential to fully participate in the world economy and in the EU ultimately depends. Khristo Zheliazkov, president of the trade-union

confederation KNSB, has warned about the possible consequences of the prospective EU admission,

Per capita income in Bulgaria is only 28 percent of the EU average. True, prices in Bulgaria are still only about 33 percent of those in the EU, but by 2007 they are expected to grow to 60-70 percent of average prices in the EU countries, as has already happened in all EU newcomers. I ask what would happen if per capita income in Bulgaria remains the same. There would simply be a torrent of emigrants, especially among the younger, better educated, and employable Bulgarians. Then how would Bulgaria achieve economic growth with the remaining population of elderly, impoverished, marginalized, and poorly educated people? (Standart 2005c)

Bulgarian authorities are also worried (although such worries are rarely expressed openly in public) by the fact that 60-70 percent of all newborns in 2003 and 2004 came from the country's non-Slavic minorities (Roma, Muslim Turks, etc.), a tendency that could reduce the share of Slavic Bulgarians to less than 60 percent of the total population by 2050.¹² Such a seemingly inevitable demographic development could exacerbate already simmering ethno-religious tensions between the Slavic Bulgarian majority and the country's Turkish and Roma minorities, and possibly destroy the prevailing tenuous ethnic peace in Bulgaria. Bulgarian nationalists on both the Left and the Right have long resented what they consider the "anti-constitutional" presence of the ethnic Turk-dominated party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), in every post-Communist parliament, as well as its ability to play the role of king-maker after nearly every general election. Following the latest parliamentary election of June 25, 2005, in which the Movement won nearly half a million ballots (or 14.17 percent of the popular vote), and will control 34 seats in the 240-seat National Assembly (see Table 2), once again it looks like the next government can be formed only with the DPS's participation in the ruling coalition. But any future numerical strengthening of the controversial parties representing the Turkish and Roma minorities could spell more trouble for Bulgaria's already troubled "ethnic model" (see Vassilev 2002; Vassilev 2004a). Founded just two months before the election, the ultranationalist *Ataka* (Attack) party, which won 8.75 percent of the popular vote and will control 21 seats in the newly-elected legislature (Table 2), has already publicly called for banning the Turkish language from being used in the broadcasts of Bulgaria's National Television.

Table 2: Official results of Bulgaria's parliamentary elections held on June 25, 2005

Political party/coalition	Votes	Percent	Seats
Coalition for Bulgaria	1,129,196	34.17	82
National Movement for Simeon II	725,314	22.08	53
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	467,000	14.17	34
<i>Ataka</i> Coalition (ultranationalists)	296,848	8.75	21
United Democratic Forces	280,323	8.33	20
Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria	234,788	7.08	17
Bulgarian People's Union	189,268	5.42	13

Source: Bulgaria's Central Election Commission (June 29, 2005)

On the other hand, not all short-term consequences of Bulgaria's sharp demographic decline and population crisis have been entirely negative. On the plus side, the population decrease has in fact ameliorated a number of other domestic problems. For example, the unemployment rate, currently hovering just below 15 percent, would have been much higher without the great wave of emigration (both legal and illegal) taking place since 1989. In addition, the remittances of Bulgarians working abroad provide crucial financial support, ensuring the financial and even physical survival of many members of their immediate family and other relatives who have remained at home. According to data provided by the Bulgarian Economic Chamber, well over 700,000 Bulgarians, mostly young people with a good education and professional skills who left the country in the 1990s, have remitted at least \$3 billion from abroad (Marinova 2004), a major foreign-currency shot-in-the-arm for the struggling national economy. In fact, remittances from Bulgarians abroad may soon rival many traditional sources of Bulgaria's national income. Even more paradoxically, the low birth rate and the emigration of many young people have also contributed to the recent decline of the crime rate in 2001-2004, according to the Sofia-based Center for the Study of Democracy (Standart 2005c).

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that Bulgaria's deteriorating demographic situation is nothing short of a national catastrophe. It is also clear by now that this depopulation trend is economically and socially determined. There is an apparent link between the population crisis and the socioeconomic trends since the transition process began in late 1989, especially the sharp declines in both output and hiring, in real wages and labor force participation, and the emergence and rapid increase of unemployment and underemployment. As in many other post-Communist countries, the short-term effects of market-oriented reforms have been economic regression, de-industrialization, a high jobless rate, galloping inflation, increasing inequality of incomes, widespread impoverishment, and even malnutrition. Worse still, since 1989 newly democratized Bulgaria has experienced a rapid changeover from a rather egalitarian society, in which social mobility was relatively high and mass poverty unknown, towards an unequal society in which much of the

population is impoverished and marginalized. These unforeseen and unwelcome changes have led to a “demographic shock,” whose devastating effects have manifested themselves in, among other things, the twin health and demographic crises. Given the negative health and fertility “momentum,” it is questionable whether Bulgaria can stop, let alone reverse, its population decline in the long run--even after the immediate impact of the “demographic shock” from the transition period finally wears out.

Nor can the long-term implications of Bulgaria’s population profile be described as positive or optimistic. Without radical changes in lifestyles, social welfare policies, and public health conditions, the country faces the likelihood of nothing less than future demographic suicide. Given Bulgaria’s host of other severe problems and troubles, revising its sub-replacement fertility, mortality, and emigration rates, and thus avoiding a demographic “death,” will continue to be a daunting challenge for the current cabinet, as well as for all future governments. Like other countries in the “New Europe” of ever smaller territorial states with declining and aging populations prone to vote “with their feet,” Bulgaria will have trouble maintaining its place in the international ranking of per-capita GNPs or avoiding further marginalization in the globalized economy, given its negligible and dwindling participation in economic production, world trade, and global capital markets.

Endnotes

- ¹ The fertility rate is the actual level of childbearing of a country’s population. It is a demographic measure that relates the number of live births in a given year to the total population size in that year. Fertility rates are usually combined with mortality rates to generate an overall reproduction rate.
- ² Life expectancy at birth is the number of years of life a person can expect at the time of birth. It is a widely used indicator of health standards and socioeconomic standards of living. Due to variations in mortality rates among countries, life expectancies also vary considerably--from around 30 to 40 years at birth in the least developed countries to 75 and over in the major industrialized Western nations.
- ³ Usually standardized for age and sex to facilitate comparisons between geographic areas and social groups, the mortality rate is used as a measure of health risks, improvements in the quality of health care, and the comparative overall health of the population. It is a reliable indicator of economic and social change, and of comparative standards of living. The crude death-rate is the number of deaths in a year per 1,000 population. The infant mortality rate is the number of deaths within the first year of life divided by the number of live births in the same year.
- ⁴ The crude birth rate is the number of live births in a year per 1,000 population. It is a demographic measure designed to provide information on the comparative fertility of different populations.
- ⁵ The total fertility rate (TFR) is the average number of children that would be born per woman if all women lived to the end of their childbearing years (commonly set at 15 to 49).
- ⁶ Uzanicheva (2004a) quotes Dr. Alexander Simidjiev, a *GlaxoSmithKline* representative in Bulgaria, as saying that “The stress in our everyday life and the lack of funds to buy modern medicine are the key factors for the short lifespan of Bulgarians.”

- ⁷ Due to an increase in the age of retirement, Bulgaria's dependency ratio has recently improved somewhat as there were 96 pensioners for every 100 working adults in 2004, according to preliminary government statistics.
- ⁸ For a definition of the term "demographic shock," see Eberstadt 2003; Eberstadt 2005.
- ⁹ The Human Development Index (HDI) is a measure representing the unweighted average of real purchasing power, life expectancy, literacy, and educational level.
- ¹⁰ To make a virtue out of necessity, the post-Communist governments have allowed Bulgarian women to serve in the reformed military.
- ¹¹ A shrinking Bulgarian military may not be a problem for NATO itself, which has not imposed any numeric requirements on new members like Bulgaria.
- ¹² See the interview with sociologist Mikhail Mirchev of the survey agency ASSA-M in "Horata ne se jeniat ot bednost" [Bulgarians Do Not Marry Due to Poverty], *Standart*, May 3, 2004.

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