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Population Changes in the Region of the Great Bačka Canal in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century

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Abstract

Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, in geographical terms, includes the northern part of Serbia, northwards from Sava and Danube. Vojvodina covers one quarter of Serbia, and about 27 % of the population of Serbia lives on its territory. It consists of three mesoregional units: Banat, Bačka and Srem.

The subject of this paper is the analysis of population changes in the central part of Bačka – the region of the Great Bačka Canal, comprising the areas of municipalities through which this canal flows. At the end of the 17th century, around 40 % of surfaces in this region were covered with ponds and swamps. With the digging of Great Bačka Canal, drainage has increased the surfaces of fertile land and living conditions have been improved, which lead to mass immigration of mainly Germans, but also of members of other ethnic groups.

The Great Bačka Canal region is a constant migration area, with extremely high percentage of agricultural land, with a sharp decline in the share of economically active population engaged in agriculture, an industry that was not adaptable to the transition processes and the time of disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, with deterioration of the quality of water in the Great Bačka Canal down to the level of endangering living conditions, it has been a depopulation area for more than three decades. The paper contains a comparison of changes in the number of inhabitants in the region of Great Bačka Canal, Bačka and Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

Keywords: Great Bačka Canal Region, Bačka, Vojvodina, population changes.

1. Introduction

Region of Vojvodina, in geographical terms, includes the northern part of Serbia, northwards from Sava and Danube. It consists of three mesoregional units: Banat, Bačka and Srem. Vojvodina covers one quarter of Serbia, and about 27 % of the population of Serbia lives on its territory (Bubalo-Živković et al., 2018).

Bačka spreads on the area between 45°16' and 46°22' of the north geographic latitude and 18°36' and 20°37' of the east geographic longitude. It occupies the area of 9,244 km², which makes for 42.89 % of the territory of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (APV), or 10.44 % of the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The area of Bačka is mostly bounded by natural borders, i.e. the Danube and the Tisza rivers. Namely, the Danube surrounds Bačka in the west and south, and the Tisa in the east. Only the northern border, towards the neighboring Republic of Hungary, is artificial, and it stretches from the Danube in the west to the Tisa in the east. While the eastern

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and western borders generally stretch in the meridian direction, the northern and southern borders extend in a parallel direction.

Determining the Great Bačka Canal (GBC) region is a very complex procedure. It could only be roughly determined based on the borders of the municipal areas in the central part of Bačka through which this canal flows, connecting its western and eastern landscapes (Figure 1). These are the territories of the city of Sombor and the municipalities of Kula, Vrbaš, Srbobran and Bečež, whose total area is about 2,804 km², which is about 13.04 % of the area of APV (Pantelić, 2012).

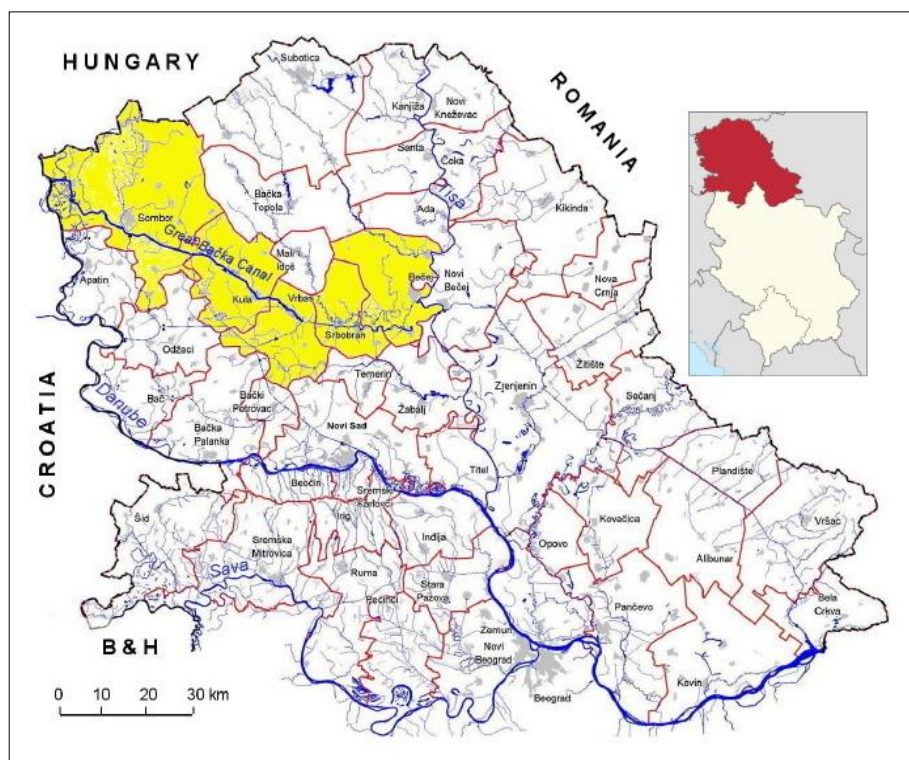


Fig. 1. Location of the Great Bačka Canal Region

Source: [Vode Vojvodine](#)

At the end of the 17th century, around 40 % of these areas were covered in ponds and swamps. Until the beginning of the 18th century, around 2,670 km² or 32 % of the territory of Bačka was covered with underwater land, and in South Bačka it covered 2,160 km² or 54 % of its surface. In this period, South Bačka had around 2-3 residents per km² (Milošev, 2002).

With the digging of the Great Bačka Canal, the exploitation of which began in 1802, favourable living conditions were made. Since the time they started settling this area, the people made various influence on it. They built settlements, performed numerous regulations of its flow, they used its water. However, the biggest human influence on this canal is noticed from the start of industry development, and it has increased year after year. Precisely the human factor was crucial to deterioration of the quality of water in the Great Bačka Canal, which jeopardized the entire living world of the water ecosystem, as well as the people inhabiting its surroundings.

1.1. History of settlement and migration

The territory of Bačka has been inhabited since the earliest periods the human race. It has been inhabited since prehistory. A number of sites from paleololite, mesolite and neolite have been found which indicate the continuing population (Kovačević, 2009). The population settled in these areas due to favorable living conditions, sufficient water and fertile land. Events in further historical stages were turbulent in this area with frequent changes of peoples, cultures and state forms. However, Bačka has always been attractive to the population because of its fertile land, pastures, rich rivers and hunting grounds.

Changes in the population of Bačka were frequent because the periods of demographic and economic prosperity alternated with the periods of recession and depopulation. Frequent

migrations of peoples, numerous wars, epidemics, changes in states and cities, different economic changes, industrialization and urbanization processes caused huge demographic changes. Some of these factors had a stimulating effect, while others had a depressing effect on the number and ethnic structure of the population of Bačka (Kicošev et al., 2006).

All these changes are interesting for geographic research, with significant difficulties caused by rare, irregular, incomplete and unreliable censuses (Kicošev et al., 2006).

The greatest influence on today's ethnic structure of Vojvodina has been made by migrations from the beginning of the 18th century to the present. War events, natural conditions, political and historical circumstances that led to emigration and immigration have resulted in the ethnic structure as it is today (Bubalo-Živković et al., 2018).

During the early Middle Ages, large migrations of various peoples took place across the territory of today's Bačka, but only the Hungarians managed to create a more permanent state and achieve domination until the arrival of the Turks, who definitely occupied it in 1542 and turned it into a demographic desert. Hungarian population fled to the northern parts of what was then Hungary. Over the course of their reign, the Turks inhabited Bačka with South Slavs – predominantly with Serbs and Bunjevci. When the Habsburgs finally banished the Turks from Hungary and Vojvodina, at the end of the 17th and in the beginning of the 18th century, they slowly started inhabiting the devastated, and partially uninhabited, area towards the border with the Ottoman Empire, which was then on the rivers of Sava and Danube (east of Belgrade).

The monarchs from the Habsburg dynasty had a simple and logical policy – the “freed” and relatively “empty” area that was left after the Turks withdrew had to be populated, if they ever had any intention to keep this area. Every empty area that was left would be an open invitation to the Ottoman Empire to “take what is nobody's or what nobody wants” (Popović, 2010).

Austrian rulers were particularly skilled in one thing – the making of a state, or more precisely, the establishment of everything that was necessary for a society, which is the base of every state, to function properly. According to records in the Endowment of Danubian Swabians in Munich, Emperor Charles VI (1711-1740) was the first one to start the colonization of what we call Vojvodina today. The process was continued by his daughter, Empress Maria Theresa (1740–1780), and in a certain sense, it was completed by her son, Emperor Joseph II (1780–1790). To them, Vojvodina was the “Bulwark of Christendom” in the defence from the Turkish Empire, i.e. from Islam.

The efficient defence of the “bulwark”, i.e. of the border from the new invasion of the Turks, required three things: defenders, infrastructure and logistics. Also, Austrian rulers saw something else in Vojvodina – a granary of the empire. The defenders came alone. In the war between the Austrians and the Turks, the Serbs, who then made up the majority of population in today's Southern Serbia and Kosovo, decided to side with their Christian brothers, the Austrians. When the Austrians lost, the Serbs had no other alternative but to follow them north. That is how the Great Migration of the Serbs (1683–1699) under Patriarch Arsenije III Černojević. Subsequent wars and turmoil led to the Second Migration of Serbs. The last great escape was led by Patriarch Arsenije IV Jovanović-Šakabenta in 1740 took place.

During the migrations of Serbs, Germans started coming from distant parts of various German kingdoms, counties and duchies (a united Germany did not exist at the time). This was a well-designed and brilliantly executed strategy of planned settlement of people who best responded to the plans of the Habsburg Monarchy for the settlement and defence of the south-eastern part of the empire.

Large parts of Banat, Bačka, and even Baranja, were inhospitable marshes and swamps, which first needed to be drained and cultivated, and then conduct a mass settlement. Poor German peasants were chosen for this difficult task, and they were stimulated to settle today's Vojvodina with stories about “a new begging in prosperity of the great empire”.

At first, the Habsburgs wanted farmers, agriculturists and stockmen, preferring those without land and those with barely enough wealth to survive. They were promised an abundance of fertile land and a much better life. What they weren't told is that, in majority of cases, this land first had to be taken away from the capricious Mother Nature (Popović, 2010).

Mid-18th century, with the objective to conduct a successful colonization, Austria measures and maps the land in Bačka, and as part of a solution for water management and hydrotechnical problems, the brothers Kiss suggested a project for construction of a canal that would connect Danube near Monoštor with Tisa near Bačko Gradište. The project was accepted and its

implementation started in 1793, with numerous technical and administrative issues, and with the constant problem of labour shortages. The largest hydro facility in the Danube region and in Southeastern Europe was ready for navigation in June 1801. After the completion of trial run and the verification of its functionality, at the beginning of 1802, which is considered to be the year of the end of construction, the exploitation of the Danube-Tisa navigable canal began. The total shortening of the fairway between the middle and lower reaches of the Tisa and the Danube rivers is about 200 km. The first sections of this canal justified the expectations, therefore it was accepted with the idea of building a canal that would connect the Danube near Monoštor with the Tisa near Bačko Gradište (Petrović, 1979).

The history of construction of the Great Bačka Canal will remain recorded as a significant event for the global history of hydro facilities. Some techniques and innovations will be repeated later on, during the construction of the Suez Canal. Aside from major technical novelties, construction of the Canal contributed to development of economy of that time, and what's most important is that after centuries of struggle with marshes, diseases and floods, the Great Bačka Canal made life in Bačka possible, and it turned former ponds and swamps into tame, fertile plains.

The colonization of the area of today's Vojvodina during the 18th and 19th centuries was done for economic reasons, in order to increase the arable land, to improve the way the land is cultivated, as well as the specialization of some sectors of agricultural production. The Germans were the most numerous, and sometime later a larger number of Hungarians came as well. During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovaks, Czechs, Jews, and Ruthenians immigrated in small numbers – in general, colonization included members of nations from which the Vienna court could have any benefit, political or economic. There were also Spaniards, Italians and French who either returned or merged with the Germans and Hungarians.

During the 20th century, intensive ethnic changes in this area continued, including the emigration of the German population, and the further immigration of the Serbian population. A significant influx of the population occurred after the First World War, with immigration of the population from the regions of the newly emerged state, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The settlement was carried out because of arable agricultural land and numerous agricultural households that were left empty after the emigration of the German population from these areas after the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian state. For the same reasons, the settlement of the population continued after the Second World War. Most Germans left these regions, and after-war migrants, mainly from Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and South Serbia, came in their place. However, in the second half of the 20th century, rural-urban migrations started to take place, which lead to the extinction of villages. Not all cities were equally burdened with population, the more intense migrations moved towards larger regional centres. However, in the second half of the 20th century, rural-urban migration took place, which led to the extinction of villages.

Over the last decades, migration have been mainly directed towards moving from the Vojvodina area, which together with negative natural growth leads to a constant decrease in the number of inhabitants. In addition, Vojvodina still has many ethnic groups, which gives it the epithet "Little Europe" (Bubalo-Živković et al., 2018).

Mass migration from the territory of former Yugoslavia happened at the end of the 20th century, and over the past decades, migrations were mainly focused on relocation from the Vojvodinian territory, which combined with negative population growth led to constant population decline.

These mechanical migrations resulted in a change in demographic markings and processes.

1.2. Subject and methods

The subject of this paper is the analysis of the population changes of the population in the GBC region.

From the total surface of the region, agricultural surfaces spread on between 84.1 % in Sombor and 92.6 % in Srbobran, which is above the provincial average, and far above the average of the Republic of Serbia. According to the 2011 Census, this region has 224,764 residents, which is 11.63 % of the total number of residents of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (APV), with the noted decrease of this region's share in the total population of APV – from 13.48 % in 1948 to 11.63 % according to the 2011 Census.

Modern statistics on the territory of today's Vojvodina appeared in the second half of the 19th century, but frequent changes of administrative borders and changes in the methodology of data processing don't offer sufficient opportunities for research and comparison. In the paper, we used data from, post-war censuses of 1948, 1961, 1971, 1991, 2002 and 2011 on the territory of Vojvodina, Bačka and the municipalities belonging to the GBC region.

The descriptive statistics research method was used in this paper for analysis of the population by national groups. The graphic method was used to display comparative statistical records in the regions GBC, Bačka and APV.

2. Results and discussion

Changes in the size of the population in the GBC region, and in other parts of Bačka and Vojvodina, were common, because periods of demographic and economic prosperity alternated with the periods of recession and depopulation.

Until the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, the territory of Bačka was a distinct immigration area. However, a drop in the prices of agricultural products happened on the global market at that time, and because of that the regions that were strictly oriented to agricultural production found themselves in an economic crisis. Considering the fact that in the GBC region, agricultural surfaces amount to between 84.1 % in Sombor and 92.6 % in Srbobran, there were extensive migrations to overseas countries, especially to America. At the beginning of the 20th century, the population of Bačka increased only because of the large natural increase, with a negative migration balance uncharacteristic not only for the observed area, but for the entire Austria-Hungary (Bačka was a part of it). The reasons for the mass emigration of the population should be sought in the penetration of industrial and market economy, which lead to a decrease in demand for labour. This process culminated in Bačka in the period from 1902–1907, but it continued with somewhat reduced intensity until the beginning of World War I. The causes for this emigration are strictly economic and social, because even the then "ruling" nations, the Hungarians and the Germans, started leaving Bačka in great numbers (Rakić, 1981).

After World War I and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the territory of Bačka became part of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. More intense migration activities took place: emigration of Hungarians and a number of Germans and Slovaks to the newly formed parent countries and immigration of Serbs and other South Slavs from Hungary and other parts of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. By 1936, a planned colonization of the population was carried out, which, like the previous ones, aimed to change the ethnic and religious character of these areas, but now the Serbs and Orthodox Christians were favoured. By World War II (1941), there was again a stronger emigration from these areas, mostly for economic reasons to overseas countries.

During World War II, Bačka was occupied by Hungary. Hungarian authorities expelled or imprisoned mostly Serb interwar colonists and colonized Hungarians from Bukovina and to a lesser extent from Bosnia and Herzegovina in their place. During the war, the population is declining primarily due to physical losses – Hungarians and Germans as soldiers, and Serbs and other peoples (Jews, Roma) in work units and camps. In the autumn of 1944, drastic changes in the population of these areas took place. Penetration of the Red Army and Partisan forces led to mass emigration of Germans and a part of Hungarians. The Germans who weren't included in the evacuations went to camps, from where they were deported from Yugoslavia in 1950 and 1951 (Kicošev et al., 2006).

The subject of this paper is the period after World War II. An overview of the population in that period is shown in Table 1.

The first census after World War II shows that 229,292 people lived in the GBC region. In administrative aspect, this region covered the Sombor, Kula and Bečej counties. Today's municipality of Vrbas was part of the Kula County, and Srbobran Municipality belonged to Bečej County. Before the war, a large number of Germans lived in this area. Some more relevant German settlements were in today's municipalities of Vrbas, Kula and Sombor. Colonization of the South Slavic population from mountainous and war-ravaged areas to the plains, to confiscated properties of evicted and encamped Germans, and to those created with the new agrarian reform, had the greatest demographic importance. This planned relocation of the population lasted until 1948.

Table 1. Population changes in the region GBC, Bačka and APV (1948–2011)

Censuses	Region GBC		Bačka		APV	
	Number	Index	Number	Index	Number	Index
1948	229,292	-	805,589	-	1,640,599	-
1953	234,695	102.4	830,371	103.1	1,698,640	103.5
1961	250,105	106.6	904,591	108.9	1,854,971	109.2
1971	254,867	101.9	960,001	106.1	1,952,560	105.3
1981	257,638	101.1	1,010,641	105.3	2,034,782	104.2
1991	251,871	97.8	1,007,319	99.7	2,013,889	99,0
2002	250,310	99.4	1,022,488	101.5	2,031,992	100,9
2011	224,764	89.8	990,364	96.8	1,931,809	95,1

Source: [Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2014](#)

The next census was carried out in 1953, and the one after that in 1961. In this period, after the organized settlement, spontaneous immigration began. The settlers were mostly people who already had colonized relatives in this area, whom they joined. At the same time, the process of industrialization of the country was initiated, which meant the transformation of peasants into workers, which caused mass migrations from villages to the cities ([Kicošev et al., 2006](#)).

The result of these 13 years was the population growth in the Great Bačka Canal region at the rate of 0.69 %, which is significantly lower compared to the entire Bačka, where the rate was 0.92 %, and the rate in APV was 0.98 %. The difference is noticeable also between certain municipalities in the region of GBC. The biggest was in the municipalities of Kula (1.24 %) and Vrbas (1.16 %), and significantly lower in Sombor (0.48 %), Bečej (0.45 %), while it was the lowest in Srbobran (0.13 %). This is the consequence of the population's structure, i.e. the degree to which certain municipalities were included in migrations. On the provincial level, the biggest number of migrants was in the Municipality of Novi Sad (63.1 % of the total population), which is understandable because it is interesting to migrants as a regional centre, with great employment and education opportunities. In the GBC region, it's Vrbas (59.3 %) and Kula (51.9 %) municipalities, while the Srbobran Municipality had 32.8 % of migrant population, according to the 1961 census, in Bečej (0.45 %), Sombor (45.6 %).

According to results of the census from 1971, a population growth suddenly slowed down – in the territory of Bačka the growth rate was 0.61 %, in the territory of APV it was 0.53 %, while this rate amounted to barely 0.19 % in the GBC region.

This trend continued in the next decade – the population growth rate in GBC region was 0.11 %, which is significantly lower than the rate in Bačka (0.53 %) and APV (0.42 %). Municipalities of Bečej (-0.16 %) and Srbobran (-0.56 %) posted negative rates, in Sombor the rate is equal to the rate on the level of the entire GBC region (0.11 %), the growth rate was somewhat higher in Kula (0.24 %), and in Vrbas it was approximately like the rate in the entire Bačka (0.52 %). Some significant changes happened in this period, due to which the GBC region, as well as the entire Bačka, ceased to be attractive immigration areas. Yugoslavia encountered great economic issues, which is why it resorted to opening the borders, which enabled the surplus labor force to go abroad for temporary work. Former immigrants from underdeveloped mountainous areas were much more attractive to go to work abroad than to emigrate to Bačka. This process was joined by the local population, which could no longer find a job in the city that easily, so increasingly more people also decided to go to work abroad ([Kicošev et al., 2006](#)).

At the end of 1980s, Bačka faced a sudden drop in natural increase of the population and a constant appearance of its negative values, which was primarily the consequence of declining birth rates. Increase in the number of inhabitants in Bačka in this period is primarily a consequence of immigration to large city centres, such as Novi Sad and Subotica, which attracted immigrants with their developed industry, primarily from other parts of APV – Banat and Srem. The GBC region does

not have such a city centre and its inhabitants follow the trend of relocation, which is least pronounced in Vrbas, whose economy survives in such conditions, and the inhabitants of this municipality have a tradition of daily commuting to Novi Sad, but remain living in their settlements.

In the 1991 census, for the first time, a decrease in the population was recorded in all the observed regions. Depopulation in Bačka was in stagnation, after the population in Bačka decreased at the average annual rate of -0.03 % within the inter-census decade. At the APV level, this rate was -0.1 %; and in the GBC region it was -0.22 %. The crucial factor here was the influence of the cities, Novi Sad primarily, where the population increased at the average annual rate of 3.75 %. In the GBC region, the population size dropped the fastest in Sombor (rate -0.31 %) and Srbobran (-0.40 %), it was somewhat slower in Bečej (-0.16 %) and Kula (-0.12 %), while the Municipality of Vrbas posted a growth with the annual rate of 0.14 %.

In the inter-census period from 1991 to 2002, we noticed differences in tendencies between the observed regions. Depopulation in the GBC region was in stagnation, decrease was recorded at the average annual rate of -0.01 %. The situation was similar in all the municipalities – it was positive in Sombor (0.01 %) and Srbobran (0.03 %), and it was negative in Vrbas (-0.01 %), Kula (-0.02 %) and Bečej (-0.04 %). In Bačka and APV, the average annual rate was 0.01 %. The population in Bačka increased to 1,022,488, which is the highest number throughout the entire observed period. The cause for this population recovery of Bačka is the strong inflow of refugees, primarily Serbs, from Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina after the breakup of SFR Yugoslavia. In this period, a significant number of Hungarians, and even Croats, emigrated to their parent countries (Kicošev et al., 2006).

The decline in population in all three observed regions was most pronounced in the inter-census period from 2002–2011. The GBC region has the lowest population after World War II (224,764), the population of Bačka has decreased below one million (990,364), with an average annual rate of -0.35 %, and population in the Province is below two million (1,931,809 with an average annual rate of -0.54 %. The city of that stands out from other parts of the Province and Bačka is Novi Sad, which in the same period recorded population growth at an average annual rate of 1.27 %, which affected the overall balance in Bačka and APV. Depopulation in the GBC region was at an average annual rate of -1.13 %. The most unfavourable situation is in Sombor (-1.30 %) and Kula (-1.21 %), while the rate is lower in Vrbas (-0.91 %), Srbobran (-0.96 %) and Bečej (-0.99 %).

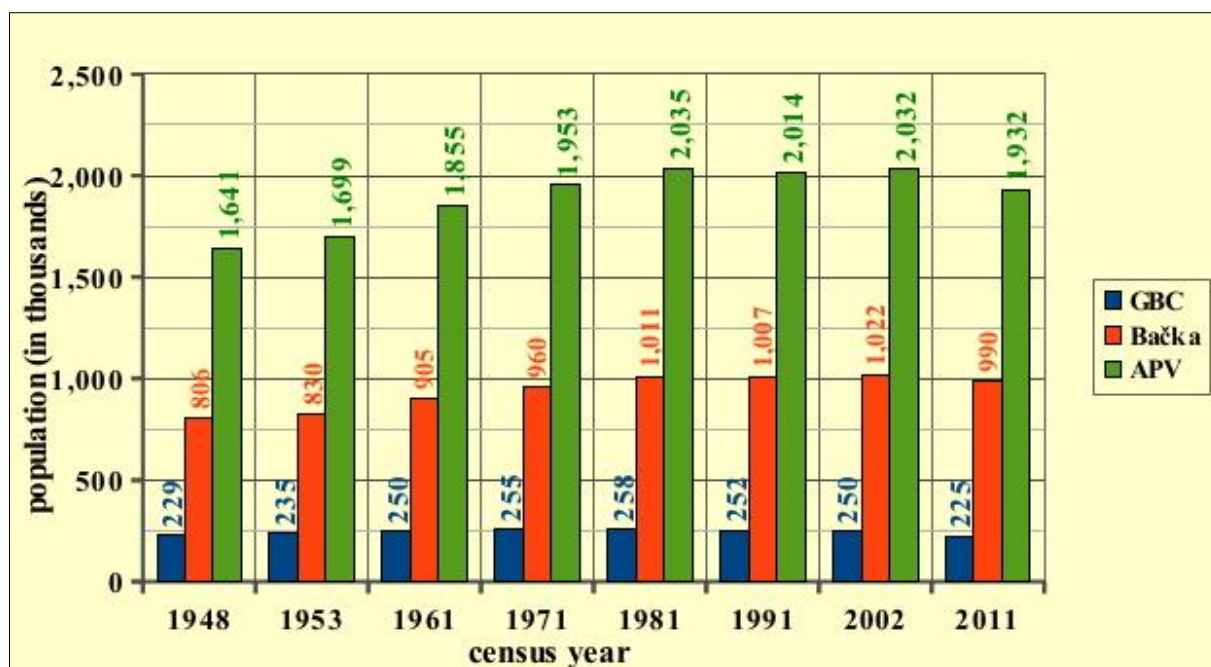


Fig. 2. Population in the region GBC, Bačka and APV (1948–2011)

Source: [Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2014](#)

In the period from 1961–2010 there have been significant changes in natural increase in all the regions. Municipalities in the observed regions had a natural increase that fluctuated, but their depopulation trends were neutralized by a constant positive migration balance. At the level of APV, natural increase was the largest in 1961 and it amounted to 7.7 ‰, the negative natural increase in APV began in 1989, and in the first decade of the 21st century it amounted to about -5 ‰. In the municipalities belonging to GBC region, the municipality of Bečej was the first to enter the phase of fluctuation (years with negative and positive natural increase changed) in 1970, and in 1978 it had a constant negative natural increase, which in the period from 2001–2010 amounted to an average of -6.32 ‰. The municipality of Srbobran has been in a phase of fluctuation since 1972, since 1978 its natural increase has been negative and in the period 2001–2010 it amounted to an average of -7.0 ‰; the municipality of Sombor has had a negative natural increase since 1982 (with the exception of 1985) and in the period 2001–2010 it amounted to an average of -7.5 ‰. The municipality of Kula has had a negative natural increase since 1991 and in the period from 2001–2010 it amounted to an average of -5.4 ‰. The last municipality in the region that entered the negative natural increase was Vrbas in 1996, and in the period from 2001–2010 it amounted to an average of -2.8 ‰. Thus, the decrease in the number of inhabitants is a consequence of negative natural increase and a negative migration balance ([Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2012](#)).

3. Conclusion

Region of the Great Bačka Canal, located in the central part of Bačka, whose main characteristic is its very fertile land, has become a very desirable area for living and business with the construction of the canal, so much so that throughout history it has been the place of settlement of members of different ethnic groups. As the countries to which it belonged changed, there were mechanical movements of the population.

Unlike other parts of APV and Bačka, the GBC region is characterized by the influence of colonisations caused by the construction of the canal, more intensive development of agriculture, significant industrialization and development of the entire area. Because of that, the migration processes were more pronounced – Immigration in favourable periods, emigration of Germans and parts of Hungarians after the world wars, arrival of colonists, rural-urban migration. Fewer and fewer inhabitants were engaged in agriculture, and the transition and the breakup of Yugoslavia had a very unfavourable effect on the economic status of the entire region. From the once leading municipalities in the APV, and even in the entire Republic of Serbia, the GBC region has become an exodus area.

With the accelerated industrialization and negligence for the treatment of industrial and communal wastewater during the second half of the 20th century, the Great Bačka Canal became the most polluted watercourse in Serbia, and even in Europe. In the 1990s, activities were initiated to understand the problem of pollution and to design solutions for industry and communal wastewater treatment, which was not realized due to economic sanctions and wars in this area.

Plans for the revitalization of the canal are being made. In the spatial plans and sustainable development plans of all municipalities belonging to this region, great importance is given to this process and the future development of each one of them is connected with the Great Bačka Canal. The effects of this should be the revival of the economy, increasing employment and creating conditions for stopping the emigration process, which would ensure the reduction and even stopping of the depopulation process.

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