

Sparsely populated areas in Lithuania and their residents

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Project was financed by the Research Council of Lithuania

Project period: 2012 – 2013

The summary main results

The project revealed the main peculiarities of network of sparsely populated territories (SPT) and its changes, their demographic and social development trends. The main influence of depopulation trends on the rural life was analysed. Peculiarities of economy, land use, farming, recreation and tourism and settlement system in SPT were revealed as well as trends of demographic change and emigration trends established.

New unique data of local level was obtained and data bank of statistical indicators of SPT was made. The project facilitated geographical and regional research in Lithuania, generated international collaboration and preparation of scientific publications and presentations (7 papers and monograph were prepared, 10 presentations at international and local conferences were presented). 183 sparsely populated LAU 2 regions (seniunija) were identified and questionings of their residents (600 in total), farmers (100) and administration leaders (70) were carried out. The map of distribution of SPT was prepared and published; the methodology of socio-economic monitoring of SPT was prepared as well as guidelines for targeted politics for development of SPT. The main results of the project were presented at local media (5 articles and TV presentations).

The main scientific results:

1. At present SPT is already occupying 45% of Lithuanian territory. 183 LAU 2 regions can be regarded as extremely sparsely populated areas. This number is growing fast and will continue to grow in the nearest future.

2. The deep demographic crisis in SPT is going on, which results in intensive depopulation and very poor demographic indicators: the birth rate is almost 3 times lower, mortality rate much higher, negative natural change 4.5 time lower than Lithuanian average. Aging population and intensive emigration results in further decrease of population (2.2% per year). There are no demographic premises for improvement of such a situation at present. The process is inevitable and natural because socio-economic capacity of those rural areas to withhold population is exceeded.

3. The depopulation is followed by the shrinkage of social and economic infrastructure, what also facilitates further depopulation. Such situation increases social and territorial exclusion of local population.

4. Most settlements of SPT are disappearing fast and relative concentration of population at the central settlements is taking place. Some villages are becoming temporary settlement for summer housing. Around a half of all settlements in SPT have fewer than 10 residents. More than a half of vanished settlements of Lithuania are concentrated in SPT.

5. More 85% of SPT are located in the areas less favourable for farming; therefore traditional agriculture there is complicated. The consolidation of inherited highly fragmented land use patterns is going on slowly here. Many small farmers are not actually involved in market production. In many cases the main objective of farming – EU support.

6. Some 60% of Lithuania's rural tourism business is concentrated in SPT. The tourism is one of the main economic functions in East Lithuanian SPT.

7. Unfavourable condition for agriculture, social degradation and intensive depopulation make serious obstacles for further social and economic development of SPT. These areas fully meet criteria for establishment of problem territories. Specific problems identified there create premises for preparation of special state support program for these territories. The legal status of SPT should be legitimated (for areas with population density less than 10 persons per km²).

8. In order to guarantee socially acceptable quality of life meeting modern standards, permanent and consistent information concerning trends of development of SPT, effectiveness of state policy and expectation of local population is necessary. This would allow to spot raising negative trends, to determine effective destinations of policy of social and economic development and to implement a long lasting effective regional policy. The prepared system for socio-economic monitoring should enable this.