

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES OF THE GEORGIAN HIGHLANDS

საქართველოს მთიანეთის დემოგრაფიული გამოწვევები

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**Abstract.** Mountains and mountainous regions are a very painful and unresolved problem for Georgia today. The mountain was and is a supplier of all the vital products that people so desperately need. Our mountains are loyal border guards of Georgia. Every highland region has its own identity, specificity, strengths and weaknesses. In the XXI century there has been a significant decline in the growth of the mountain population, the main reason for which is a significant decline in the birth rate and migration. Due to the economic problems in the highland settlements, young people can no longer stay in the villages and go to the big cities in search of work. Georgia's mountainous demographic change can be seen as a challenge for mountainous areas and not just as a problem. The article discusses the demographic situation of the mountainous regions of Georgia. Ways to improve the demographic situation of mountainous regions are proposed and issues of attractiveness of mountainous areas for young people are discussed.

**Key words:** Highlands, Demographics, Challenge, Attractiveness, Depopulation.

ნანა ახალაია

ეკონომიკის დოქტორი,  
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**აბსტრაქტი.** მთები და მთიანი რეგიონები დღეს საქართველოსათვის მეტად მტკივნეულ და მოუგვარებელ პრობლემას წარმოადგენს. მთა იყო და არის ყველა იმ სასიცოცხლო პროდუქტის მომწოდებელი, რომელიც ასე საჭიროა ადამიანებისათვის.

ჩვენი მთები ხომ საქართველოს ერთგული მესაზღვრეები არიან. ყველა მაღალმთიან რეგიონს აქვს საკუთარი თვითმყოფადობა, სპეციფიკა, სიძლიერე და საკუთარი სისუსტეები. XXI საუკუნეში მოხდა მთიანეთის მოსახლეობის რაოდენობის მნიშვნელოვანი შემცირება, რომლის მთავარი მიზეზი შობადობის ტემპის საგრძნობი დაცემა და მიგრაციაა. მაღალმთიან დასახლებებში ეკონომიკური პრობლემების გამო ახალგაზრდები სოფლებში ვეღარ ჩერდებიან და სამუშაოს საძიებლად დიდ ქალაქებში მიდიან. საქართველოს მთიანეთის დემოგრაფიული ცვლილება შეიძლება განვიხილოთ, როგორც გამოწვევა მთიანი ტერიტორიებისთვის და არა მხოლოდ, როგორც პრობლემა. სტატიაში განხილულია საქართველოს მაღალმთიანი რეგიონების დემოგრაფიული ვითარება. შემოთავაზებულია მაღალმთიანი რეგიონების დემოგრაფიული მდგომარეობის გაუმჯობესების გზები და განხილულია ახალგაზრდებისათვის მთიანი ტერიტორიების მიმზიდველობის საკითხები.

**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** მაღალმთიანეთი, დემოგრაფია, გამოწვევა, მიმზიდველობა, დეპოპულაცია

## Introduction

Mountainous areas face demographic challenges along the way. Their population density is lower than in other areas and, in many cases, the population is shrinking or the risk of shrinkage is critical. Demographic problems are considered by demographers as an accompanying process in the development of civilization. Not only Georgia, but the whole civilized world is facing such a dilemma. The cause is the birth rate and socio-economic underdevelopment. This is not only our problem, in all developed countries the share of the population that ensures the development of agriculture remains rural. With us, this part is moving towards the city, they want to be employed, to develop more, because the mountainous regions of Georgia do not allow it. Highland regions in Georgia are facing depopulation. According to the Law of Georgia on the Development of Mountainous Regions, 1582 settlements were granted the status of mountainous settlements. According to the law prepared by the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia, a highland settlement is a settlement located at or above 1500 meters above sea level. Despite being located at an appropriate altitude above sea level, The status of highland settlement is given to the settlements located in the following historical-geographical parts of Georgia: Khevi, Mtiuleti, Pankisi ravine, highland Adjara, Gudamakari ravine, Pshav-Khevsureti, Tusheti, Zemo Svaneti, Kvemo Svaneti, Lechkhumi, Racha. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Law of Georgia on the Development of Mountainous Regions

**Methods:**

This article is based on following research methods: Empirical, Sociological and Statistical research methods

**Results:**

In results we can say that, there is more potential for order increase youth confidence given, that they have a successful life in mountainous areas. Territorial development strategies of the regions should promote the preservation of the environment, the use of innovation and the preservation and development of modern mountain communities. The availability of employment opportunities is a prerequisite for young people to meet career expectations and attract working-age populations. We believe there is great potential in this regard.

A recent pandemic underscores movements toward the mountains and, in some cases, the positive path when people return to abandoned homes in mountainous areas. With the help of the state, they will start small businesses there, and bring new ideas for the development of the mountain environment. I think there are conditions for the renaissance of the Georgian highlands. Mountainous areas will be able to provide their population with sufficient housing, facilities and services.

**Discussion:**

By 2020, the population of Georgia was 3,723.5 thousand people, and the population density was 1 sq. km. per km - 65.1 people. 58.7 percent of the population of Georgia lives in urban areas. However, the population of the capital is almost a third of the total population. The smallest population lives in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti region (29.7 thousand people) and the population density per 1 sq. km does not exceed 7 persons. At the same time, 48.1 percent of the population of Georgia are men and 51.9 percent are women. The share of men aged 0-14 in the total population is higher than women, and in the population aged 65 and over, women outnumber men, which is due to the higher life expectancy of women compared to men. The number of children under 16 is decreasing in the villages and the number of people over 60 is increasing.<sup>2</sup>

According to the latest census of the population of Georgia (2014), about 331.4 thousand people live in the settlements with the status of highland settlements. which is 28% less than in the 2002 census. However, approximately 32.3% (107,065) of the population of the mountainous settlements of Georgia live above 1500 m above sea level. 52.1% (172,540) of the population of highland settlements live in the Lesser Caucasus region, 33.7% (111,827) - in the Greater Caucasus region and in the mountainous lowlands- 14.2% (47,049). 35.5% (117,795) of the inhabitants of the highland settlements live in the highland historical-geographical parts, most of them - 47.8% (56 219) live in highland Adjara. A small part of the highland

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.geostat.ge>

settlements are of urban type (26 cities and towns), the share of their population in the total population of highland settlements is 15.3% (50,537 inhabitants). 53% of mountainous settlements with 1,000 and more inhabitants (27 out of 51 settlements) are in Adjara and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions. There are equal numbers of such settlements in the western and eastern parts of the Greater Caucasus. At the same time, the population of the largest highland settlement in the Greater Caucasus does not exceed 2.7 thousand. The problem of depopulation is most acute in the highland settlements of the Greater Caucasus. The largest population decline in the period between recent censuses, compared to other regions of Georgia was observed in Racha-Lechkhumi (37.4%) and Kvemo Svaneti region (4.5%). In most of the highland settlements, the population is aging and the demographic burden of the population is increasing. According to the 2014 census, the average age in Georgia is 38.1 years. In 48.7% of highland settlements it is higher than this figure. The highest average age is in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti region (48.2 years). Population aging is most pronounced in this region, 53% of the population is over 50 years old, the share of the main reproductive age population (25-44 years old) is less than 20 percent of the population. According to the latest census, there are 255 villages in Georgia with less than 10 inhabitants, and 223 villages are emptied. There are several regions facing demographic problems, between them, the most difficult situation is in Mtskheta-Mtianeti. There are 111 villages in this region where one or two people live. There are 5 or less inhabitants in 71 villages and 39 to 6 to 10 people. The most deplorable situation is in Dusheti district, of which 93 villages have less than 10 inhabitants. Then there is Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, there are up to 5 people in 20 villages and 6 to 10 people live in 17 villages. The situation is similar in Shida Kartli of which 29 out of 29 villages have up to 5 people, and 11 have 6 to 10 people living there.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main causes of structural aging of the population is the migration of young and able-bodied population. Increasing the incidence of natural disasters due to migration from highland settlements, access to employment and education is a problem for the population. Due to lack of proper living conditions or jobs, part of the highland settlements is characterized by seasonal labor migration and in some highland settlements the population lives for periods of less than 9 months throughout the year. With a high coefficient of peripherality (which determines the actual disconnection from the administrative center of the municipality) 40% of highland settlements are distinguished, high coefficient of peripherality in the vast majority of them is the result of road infrastructure. From the 2002 census to the 2014 census, the rural population has shrunk by half a million, which is alarming. Due to economic problems in highland settlements, young people can no longer stay in the

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<sup>3</sup> 2014 General Population Census of Georgia

villages and go to the big cities in search of work. The villages will soon be left without a permanent population.

Highland regions, despite their different characteristics, face common challenges, which are a contributing factor to the deteriorating demographic situation these are:

- For highland settlements in all regions public transport services and level of road infrastructure development is a barrier to population movement and therefore in terms of engaging in economic activity of access to services
- Central water supply and municipal waste management services are not fully accessible to the population of mountainous regions
- A common challenge is the lack of qualified labor resources and the lack of skills needed for entrepreneurial activities in the population
- Getting on-site education suitable for modern requirements in highland settlements
- Sports and cultural infrastructure is mainly located in the administrative centers of the municipalities and due to the high periphery of highland settlements, the population has difficulty accessing these services
- Inaccessibility of vocational education on the ground prevents young people and economically active population from acquiring a profession and raising their qualifications.<sup>4</sup>

Added to all these problems is the fact that agriculture is almost destroyed. Systematic development of agriculture is needed, which should ensure not only the retention of the population on the ground, but also their return.

Demographic change is happening everywhere in the highlands of Europe as well. Aging is a common trend, as well as increasing urbanization and population concentration in ever-increasing agglomerations, but demographic changes are being considered as one of the main challenges for the near future for the EU as a whole. Both the European Commission and the European Parliament have taken steps to address these facts and to develop a number of documents.

Demographic changes we can also consider, as a challenge for mountainous areas and not just as a problem. The problem is that, that the attitude of the national, regional or local government facing this change infrastructure quality and public services there is no offer for the mountain population. If we offer the mountaineers enough infrastructure, services and the right strategy, maybe we can stabilize population decline.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Georgian Mountainous Settlements Development Strategy 2019-2023 (project)

<sup>5</sup> PADIMA -Policies Against Depopulation In Mountain Areas. Strategies to increase the attractiveness of mountain areas: how to approach depopulation in an integrated manner

In order to, demographic transformation to take place in the highlands of Georgia preliminary diagnosis of the situation should be made, which includes the definition of the following elements:

- Population level, population density and population change in each municipality

- Age structure and age structure evolution trends
- Migration trends described by age structure and occupational profile
- Economic structure (by sectors, by type of companies)
- Employment rates and employment trends in the mountains
- Perception of the territory by the population: why should they stay or leave them and when It is about the mountain for the attractiveness of young people it is advisable to consider the following strategic goals for each region:

- Reverting the cessation of external migration of young people
- Provide youth education locally
- Young people were fully aware of their career opportunities,
- Which the region can offer, to return in case of going back
- Use the education system, to prepare young people to create and develop a local economy in the highlands, given the specifics of the region

- Promote the development of entrepreneurship
- Promote quality of life as a reason to live in mountainous areas
- Provide access to special courses through distance learning using information and communication technologies (ICT)

- Promote the development of the area as a wonderful place to live and work

That's right, there is a lot to be done to ensure enough attractiveness for mountain areas, but education, and again and again we should use education for young people, as a good strategy potential for future population growth.

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