

Rural Depopulation in Georgia's Mountain Regions: Research Priorities in the Context of the 2024 Population Census

Editor-in-Chief's Note

The depopulation of rural and mountain regions represents one of the most serious long-term challenges facing Georgia's spatial, social, and economic development. Among these regions, Racha stands out as an area where population decline has been both rapid and persistent, affecting settlement viability, local economies, and cultural landscapes.

The relevance of this issue is underscored by the completion of Georgia's **2024 Population Census**, the first comprehensive demographic assessment conducted in the country in a decade. The census provides an essential empirical foundation for reassessing demographic trends, regional disparities, and development challenges across Georgia. For mountain regions such as Racha, the new census data offer an unprecedented opportunity to align scientific research with updated national evidence and policy needs.

In this context, the research project *"The Depopulation of Rural Settlements in Racha: Spatio-Temporal Changes and Modern Problems"*, implemented at the Vakhushti Bagrationi Institute of Geography with the support of the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia, addresses one of the most pressing territorial challenges of our time. By combining statistical analysis of long-term demographic change with interdisciplinary fieldwork conducted directly in rural communities, the project seeks to move beyond descriptive population figures and toward a deeper understanding of the social, economic, and spatial mechanisms driving depopulation.

Preliminary insights from the research reveal a complex picture. On the one hand, limited economic diversification, infrastructural constraints, and sustained youth out-migration continue to undermine population retention. On the other hand, the relatively high educational level of the remaining population indicates the presence of significant, yet underutilized, human capital. These findings highlight that depopulation is not solely the result of geographical remoteness but also reflects structural development gaps that require targeted, evidence-based interventions.

The Georgian Geographical Journal considers research on rural depopulation and mountain regions to be of strategic importance, particularly at a moment when new census data allow for more precise and policy-relevant analysis. Future research directions should focus on spatial modelling of demographic change, comparative studies across mountain regions, and the integration of census data with local-scale qualitative research.

By fostering dialogue between empirical research and national demographic monitoring, this journal aims to contribute to a more informed and balanced discussion on regional development, territorial cohesion, and the future of Georgia's rural landscapes.

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Nana Bolashvili