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Migration and Different Relationships with the Place of Origin in Eastern Serbia: A Demographic Case Study

Abstract: The paper shows the demographic and cultural transformation of two micro-areas in eastern Serbia influenced by migration in the last few decades. The work is based on the results of qualitative field research in Homolje, Zvižd, and Ponišavlje in the period 2007–2024. The different historical and economic contexts of migration from these two micro-areas are shown through the causes and consequences of migration since the middle of the 20th century. Alongside demographic methods, the paper employs the qualitative interview and comparative method to depict multiple layers of the migration process. Through an interdisciplinary approach, we discuss the demographic causes of the ethno-anthropological phenomenon of identity transformation, and its reflection on the relationship with the place of origin. Qualitative and quantitative research confirmed the decisive influence of the socio-demographic characteristics of the migrating population and the migration destination, as well as the formation of specific identities among migrants, which resulted in a different relationship with the place of origin.

Keywords: Vlachs, Šopluk, Pirot, Kučevo, migration, ethnology, rural settlements, identity, demography.

1. Introduction

Migration, an act of spatial mobility, is an important factor in the erosion of traditional boundaries between languages, cultures, and ethnic groups, affecting identity construction. Migration is certainly not a recent phenomenon, but the scope of human mobility in the last few decades is unprecedented (Castles & Miller 2009). During the migration process, people's attachment to their place of origin is largely manifested through their remittances (Ghosh 2006; Skeldon 2008; Ivlevs, Nikolova & Graham 2019). In addition, relationships

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with the place of origin are reflected through contacts with the local community, use of native language, and practicing traditional customs (Portes & MacLeod 1996). Recent studies of migration processes have introduced the concept of transnationalism in explaining and understanding modern international migration flows (Quirke et al. 2009; Brettell 2003). However, most researchers assert that transnationalism weakens significantly in the second generation of migrants (Portes 2001), which is the case with international migrants from Serbia (Lerch et al. 2007).

This paper analyzes emigration from the place of origin, but also the migrants' relationships with their native settlement and ancestral home. Population migration can be seen as a process that results in the creation of migrants and their distinct identity, where identity is a relative category formed through the cognition of the "other" but serves to describe oneself (Žikić 2011). Antonijević et al. (2011) assert that switching between cultural patterns, one of which is for "domestic use" and the other for navigating the new environment, leads to the formation of a specific cultural identity of the guest worker. Different types of migrations from the researched area had different effects on the identity changes of those who moved away, which, again, was manifested differently in their relationships with their places of origin. Viewed in this way, migration represents a transitional path from the pre-migration to post-migration identity, during which the transformation of the place of origin (demographic, socioeconomic, architectural, etc.) also takes place. As for the temporal component of migrations, the decisive criterion for distinguishing temporary from permanent migration is the conscious desire and intention to return to the homeland among temporary migrants and not to return among permanent migrants. Yet, the duration of migration often erases this difference among European guest workers who, by definition, were temporary migrants, but whose stay in a foreign country extended for several decades, turning them into *de facto* permanent immigrants whose desire to return often transforms into a kind of myth and illusory hope that determined their relationship with their place of origin (Antonijević 2013).

The idea for this article arose from the striking demographic, ethnological, architectural, and morphological differences among the settlements of the Municipality of Kučevo and the City of Pirot¹ observed during field research on folk religion, traditional lifestyles in the countryside, and migration in eastern Serbia. In addition, the high share of Vlachs in the Municipality of Kučevo required an ethnological interpretation of migrations and their origin; it bears

¹ According to the Law on the Territorial Organization of the Republic of Serbia (Official Gazette RS 18/2016), the official names of the researched self-government units are "City of Pirot" and "Municipality of Kučevo" including urban and rural settlements. In all other references, the "City of Pirot" refers only to the urban settlement.

noting that there is still no consensus on the origin of the Vlachs in Serbian and Romanian ethnology, historiography, and demography, but the most likely hypothesis posits that they represent an ethnic amalgam with roots from the pre-Slavic period and centuries of coexistence and intermingling with the Serbian population, whose joint migrations went from one side of the Danube to the other, imposing strong Serbian and Bulgarian influences (Sorescu-Marinković 2006). Vlachs lived in the territory of Braničevo in the medieval period, as evidenced by toponyms recorded in 1467. However, some Serbian scholars have argued that today's Vlachs of eastern Serbia should not be ethnically identified with the medieval Vlachs, the descendants of the old Balkan ethnic group, and that the Vlachs of northeastern Serbia did not emerge as a community until the 18th and 19th centuries in contacts between Serbian and Romanian populations (Knežević 2013). A larger influx of Vlachs (Ungurians and Carans) from Banat and Transylvania into eastern Serbia during the 18th century, along with the preceding and parallel Kosovo-Metohija, Morava-Vardar, Šop, and Timok-Braničevo migration flows, gave the final ethno-demographic stamp to the present-day population of eastern Serbia (Cvijić 1966; Radovanović 1991; Knežević 2013). Also, in his travelogue "Through Our Romanians," Tihomir Đorđević (1906) mentions Romanians who call themselves Vlachs, noting that "in the Kingdom of Serbia, Romanians live in the area from Mount Rtanj to the Danube and from Velika Morava to Timok," i.e., that they inhabit four districts: Timok, Morava, Požarevac, and Krajina. He further states that the largest number of Romanians live near the Danube and Timok, while their numbers steadily decreased in the south and west of northeastern Serbia (Đorđević 1906). In his book "Vlachs at Sunset," Paun Es Durlić humorously presents four theories about the origin of the Vlachs, including the inverse theory, according to which the Vlachs are romanised Serbs; the autochthonist theory, which isn't accepted in academic circles but has its supporters; the Aurelian theory, which emerged in Romanian literature but is less known in the Serbian academic community, claiming that the Vlachs are the remnants of the Roman population, i.e., the Dacian population that Emperor Aurelian resettled from Dacia, and the Romanian theory, which sees the Vlachs as part of the Romanian ethnic corpus (Durlić 2020).

On the other hand, it is interesting that Cvijić (1922), describing the participants of the Morava-Vardar and Šop migration flows, says that they speak a similar dialect (*šopski*) and that the remarkable mobility of this population resulted in their breaking ties with their place of origin very quickly during frequent relocations, which is one of their most prominent ethno-psychological characteristics. The participants of these migrations were mostly cattle breeders and construction workers (bricklayers). The City of Pirot belongs to the historical-geographical area of Šopluk, which can shed more light on the character

of the later (and modern) migrations in this area. Šopluk, a wider area, and Torlak,² a part of Šopluk, have their ethno-linguistic specificities. Citing Serbian and Bulgarian authors, Dejan Krstić, in his doctoral dissertation (2014), states that since the 19th century, the word *Torlak* (*Torlačija*) has been used for the broader environs of Pirot. Krstić also refers to Simeon Hristov, who maps out the wider borders of Šopluk. “As is known, the whole of western Bulgaria is called, not quite completely, Šopluk, and on the Serbian side of the Balkan mountain range, part of that ‘Šopluk’ in the Pirot district is called Torlak, and its inhabitants are called Torlaci (exonym)” (Hristov 1894 after Krstić 2014, 28). “The border of Torlak is broader than the area of the City of Pirot itself and extends to the village of Gubeš (Bulgaria) on the southeast, in the northwest to Crvena Reka, and in the southwest to Lužnica (Babušnica)” (Krstić 2014, 28).

The differences in the physiognomy of settlements between the two researched areas and the construction periods of family houses and individual farms deepened during the period of recent intensive emigrations from the 1960s onward. Migrations were (and remain) a strong driver of large-scale demographic, economic, and ethnological changes in the observed area. This research aims to shed light on the differences between the migrations that flowed from the rural settlements of Kučevo and Pirot and caused a different relationship of the emigrants with their own place of origin and family home.

2. Theoretical Background

After World War II, mass labor migration to Western Europe began, which was followed by the formalization of migration through a series of bilateral agreements between the home countries and the former SFR Yugoslavia (with France in 1965, Austria and Sweden in 1966, and FR Germany in 1968), enabling migration flow for the decades to come. Migrations during the 1990s, in a way, represent a special phase prompted by the disintegration of the former SFRY and social crisis, marked by a particular massivity and the appearance of refugees, brain drain, and the emigration of guest workers’ children who had lived in the homeland until then. Emigration continued even after 2000, given that socioeconomic changes did not take place at the expected pace; this period was characterized by (mostly permanent) emigration of more educated segments of

² The terms *Šop* and *Torlak* are basically pejoratives used to denote personal characteristics, and a group label for residents of passive mountainous areas and a particular ethnoculture, primarily their speech. In the old vernacular, the word *torlak* meant a young man behaving rudely, who spoke loudly, shouted, and was difficult to understand, or one who roisters, “galami/torla”.

the population and seasonal and circular migration of low-skilled laborers, who took advantage of the visa liberalization regime after 2010.

Globally, intensive research on migration began in the 1960s. However, the academic field of population migration has yet to produce a coherent theory, instead proposing many fragmentary approaches. Yet, in terms of the breadth of the perspective from which we look at migration, we can say that we have a micro, meso, and macro approach. The micro approach says that an individual (as a member of a family) decides to migrate in search of a higher living standard. The meso approach stresses the existence of a complex of social ties through which migrants connect, often initiating the so-called “migration chain.” Finally, macro approaches connect migration with broader structural socioeconomic and global processes in industrialized countries, such as the dual theory of the labor market, which emphasizes the stimulating conditions of the internal laws of the labor market in developed countries, which encourage population movements in search of work (Antonijević 2013).

Migration, from the perspective of the place of origin, always takes a potential return to represent a migrant’s failure to adapt to the foreign environment, or, as a logical outcome of a planned family strategy, which had always included going back to their homeland. Moreover, it is a natural outcome of a satisfactory experience, whereby temporary migrants care most about showing their success precisely in the place of origin. According to this, “the returnee, since he tries to adapt to the expectations of the native community, and in his desire to be accepted again, tends to orient himself towards patterns of luxury/wasteful consumption and unproductive investment in the homeland” (Cassarino 2004, 260), which is often the case with our guest workers, especially in the northern part of eastern Serbia.

Anthropologists were mainly interested in what happens to migrants in the place of immigration and in what way they remain connected to the country of origin (Brettel 2003), who, how, and why emigrates, what it means to “be a migrant”, and how they interpret and construct their own identity (Antonijević 2013). In anthropological studies of migration, the assimilation model is very important given the complex processes of acculturation and integration of migrants into a new environment and building a new identity. In contrast, the transnational model is based on the perceived importance of return movements and the circularity of migration processes, so it gives special importance to the study of migrants’ intentions to return to their place of origin (Guranizo, Portes & Halles, 2003). Also, anthropology recognizes the “migration culture” that arises when migrations become the prevailing model of living within a community, increasing the probability of all future migrations (Antonijević 2013), as is the case in the Braničevo and Bor districts in Serbia (Predojević Despić & Penev 2016). Research on migration and migrants’ identity has been carried out

in almost all post-socialist countries. International migrations in Europe mainly went from east to west, creating transnational identities and connections (Anghel 2013), and simultaneously changed the socio-cultural environment in the migrants' place of origin (OECD 2016). Through the myth of return (Tomić, Pichler & Scholl-Schneider 2018) and intergenerational transfers (Földes 2020), migration has influenced the actors themselves and their relationship with the place of origin (Elrick 2008).

3. Methodology

Field research was carried out in stages from 2007 to 2024, and according to the testimonies of the respondents, we can clearly separate the period of the 1960s and the initial departure abroad from the post-2000 period of socio-economic transition, logically covering the period from 1961 to 2022. Although some authors (Antonijević 2013; Marković 2005) identify six migration waves from Serbia since 1945, for the purposes of analyzing initial social contexts, this paper uses a tripartite division: pre-1990 migrations (the socialist period); migrations during the 1990s (the crisis period); and post-2000 migrations (the most recent period).

As for the spatial framework of the research, the selection of settlements was not random, but targeted. In the municipality of Kučevo, villages where migrations started in the 1960s (where it was possible to interview all three generations of migrants) were investigated. On the other hand, the collection of testimonies on migrations in the villages of Pirot was a coincidental continuation of research during the engagement at the Museum of Ponišavlje. Within Kučevo Municipality, all settlements except Kaona, Sena, Mišljenovac, and Mustapić were investigated – a total of 22. Slightly fewer settlements were investigated within the City of Pirot (Pakleštica, Temska, Gnjilane, Gostuša, Novi Zavoj, Rsovci, Slavinja, Visočka Ržana, Dobri Do, Dojkinci, Nišor, Oreovica, Sopot, Pasjač, Barje, and Čiflik, so 16 settlements). The period of field research was quite long because it was difficult to reach migrants who work abroad, i.e., to find them in the place of origin, so it required visiting the same settlement several times, and secondly, research on their migration experiences was conducted in parallel with the research on folk customs and traditions.

The municipality of Kučevo, located in eastern Serbia, has a significant share of the Vlach ethnic group,³ which is important to consider when interpreting the drivers of migration. On the other hand, the City of Pirot in the his-

³ According to the respondents' statements about their mother tongue during field research, the share of Vlachs in the municipality of Kučevo can currently be estimated at around 30%.

torical-geographical and ethnological sense belongs to Šopluk, which includes the areas south of Rtanj Mountain, east of the South Morava, all the way to northeastern Macedonia, and in Bulgaria to Sofia and Rila Mountain (Vlahović 1999). The majority of the population of the City of Pirot are ethnic Serbs, but, regardless of the population's poor (modern) spatial mobility (Radovanović & Gigović 2010), in terms of the ethnological interpretation of migration, the specificities of the dialect and ethnopsychic characteristics of the people of Šopluk (especially in the villages on Stara planina) must not be ignored (Cvijić 1922; Cvijić 1966).

The main data sources were census books and Demographic Statistics. Documentation tables of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (RZS) served as additional descriptive sources on various features of the population. It is important to emphasize that the data on the total population were not methodologically comparable in all censuses, which is very important for analyzing the migration balance using the vital statistics method, so the total population of these two municipalities will be observed according to the census methodology from 2002 onwards, i.e. the population working/staying abroad, will be excluded from the total population in the censuses prior to 2002. Yet, the qualitative interviews and testimonies of respondents collected from 2007 to 2024 will provide decisive evidence on the relationship with the place of origin, duration of migration, and reasons for emigration and return. In this article, we will try to present an ethnological interpretation of economically and demographically driven changes in Kučevo and Pirot, synchronously using methods specific to demography and ethnological methods (qualitative interviews and the comparative method), alongside general scientific methods. On the other hand, we aim to provide strong demographic evidence for different paths of transformation of these two regions and the migrant identity of their populations

4. Results

The two observed local self-government units (SGUs) show significant differences in terms of population size (Table 1). During the observed period 1961–2022, the population of Pirot decreased from approximately 68,000 inhabitants to less than 50,000 inhabitants. This drop in the number of inhabitants took place under the dominant influence of the negative migration balance. In the same period, the number of inhabitants of the Municipality of Kučevo decreased from slightly over 30 thousand to under 12 thousand inhabitants, also under the dominant effect of the negative migration balance. However, although the intensity of depopulation in the Municipality of Kučevo was higher in relative terms, the similarity in the structure of depopulation, as well as in its absolute amount, is very indicative.

Table 1. Population dynamics

Census	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011	2022
Pirot	68073	68349	68461	67113	63791	57928	49601
Kučevo	30452	27812	24848	21752	18808	15516	11806
Population change index Pirot	/	100,4	100,2	98,0	95,1	90,8	85,6
Population change index Kučevo	/	91,3	89,3	87,5	86,5	82,5	76,1

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. 2023. *Comparative Overview of Population Numbers – Municipalities and Settlements. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings*.

The number of inhabitants of the City of Pirot (from 1961 to 2022) decreased by 18,472 inhabitants and by 18,646 in the Municipality of Kučevo, with a negative migration balance in Pirot of -12,654 and in Kučevo of -12,814 inhabitants (Table 2). Although the intensity of depopulation in the Municipality of Kučevo was higher in relative terms, in both self-government units (SGUs), approximately one-third of depopulation can be attributed to a natural decrease and two-thirds to the migration balance (68.5% and 68.7% respectively).

Table 2. Net migration balance and natural increase

Census	1961–1971	1971–1981	1981–1991	1991–2002	2002–2011	2011–2022
Migration balance Pirot	-3872	-2045	-1392	-433	-1845	-3067
Migration balance Kučevo	-3105	-3154	-2490	-2279	-1024	-762
Natural increase Pirot	4148	2157	44	-2889	-4018	-5260
Natural increase Kučevo	465	190	-606	-665	-2268	-2948

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. 2023. *Comparative Overview of Population Numbers – Municipalities and Settlements. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings; Demographic Statistics, corresponding years*.

Quantitative analysis of migration will be performed in three ways: internal migration, international migration, and net migration balance.

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

Internal migrations in the City of Pirot went towards resettlement to the municipal center, so in the period 1971–2022, the population that immigrated from other settlements of the City of Pirot ranged between 30.9% and 24.4%, while the share of persons who immigrated from other municipalities in Serbia was

between 14.1% and 11.1% of the total population. At the same time, in Kučevo, these shares were significantly lower, ranging from 17.8% to 13% and between 12.9% and 8.2%, respectively. Intra-municipal migration in the City of Pirot was 50% to 100% more intense than in the Municipality of Kučevo. Also, internal migrants in the City of Pirot, both at the beginning and at the end of the observed period, make up about 37% of the population (due to a constant decrease since 1991), while in the Municipality of Kučevo, their share, although small, is significantly increasing (Table 3).

Table 3. Total population and immigrant population – internal migrations

Census	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011	2022
Pirot – from another settlement	17953	20359	20718	17358	14452	12099
Share	25.9	29.2	30.9	27.2	24.9	24.4
Kučevo – from another settlement	3789	4154	3881	2860	2432	1925
Share	13.0	14.6	17.8	15.2	15.7	16.3
Pirot – from another SGU	7722	8055	8549	8266	8166	6517
Share	11.1	11.6	12.7	13.0	14.1	13.1
Kučevo – from another SGU	2438	2318	2260	1827	1944	1524
Share	8.4	8.2	10.4	9.7	12.5	12.9

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. 2023. *Comparative Overview of Population Numbers – Municipalities and Settlements. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings; and Migrations – Data by Municipalities and Cities, corresponding years.*

However, the annual balance of internal migration in both SGUs has been negative since 1996, with an average value of -1.6% in the City of Pirot, and -3.6% in Kučevo. Also, during the crisis of the 1990s, neither Kučevo nor Pirot was a location that saw a significant influx of refugees. Thus, only 922 refugees were registered in Kučevo in 1996, or 3.5% of the estimated population, while 1,957 refugees were registered in Pirot, or 2.9% (RZS 1997). The number of internally displaced persons was also low (370 in Pirot and 50 in Kučevo) (Rašević & Penev 2009).

As for international migration, in the 1961 Census, data on the number of people working/staying abroad wasn't collected because the phenomenon was extremely rare. A census of people temporarily working and residing abroad was carried out for the first time in 1971, when 228,115 persons (2.7% of the population) were recorded for Serbia. Going to work abroad was relatively uncommon in Pirot compared to some other municipalities in eastern and southeastern Serbia. According to the 1971 census, the number of persons from Pirot working/staying abroad was 936 or only 1.4%, while at the same time, in the Municipality of Kučevo, it amounted to 1283 inhabitants (4.4%). The number and share of

the population of the Municipality of Kučevo abroad continued to grow, unlike in Pirot. The population from Pirot working/staying abroad began to decline after the initial jump in the 1960s and 1970s. According to the 1981 census, there were 1163 such persons, 545 in 1991, 857 in 2002, and according to the 2011 census, 935 residents of Pirot were working/staying abroad, with shares of 1.7%, 0.8%, 1.3% and 1.6% respectively. On the other hand, the trend of emigrating abroad from the Municipality of Kučevo continued: in 1981, there were 3,581, in 1991 3,897, in 2002 6,068, and in 2011 as many as 6,824 residents working/staying abroad with a share of 12.6%, 13.2%, 24.4% and 30.7% respectively. According to the number and share of people working/staying abroad, Kučevo belongs to the group of highly emigrating municipalities together with Žabari, Malo Crniće, Petrovac na Mlavi, Veliko Gradište, Kladovo, and Negotin, with five to seven times higher shares of the population outside the country compared to the national average. At the same time, the City of Pirot records a value several times lower than the national average when it comes to external migration of the population (Stanković 2014). As for the 2022 Population Census, the number of people abroad in the City of Pirot remained almost the same (949), with a share of 1.9%. On the other hand, the shares of the population of Kučevo working and staying abroad are high and growing, far exceeding the corresponding shares in Pirot, reaching 34.6% of the total population, although its number decreased (Table 4) due to the significant share of returnees (excluding population from ex-Yugoslav countries) (11.5%).

Table 4. International migrations⁴

Census	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011	2022
Pirot – Immigrants from abroad	/	216	118	269	448	1078
Share*	/	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.8	2.2
Kučevo – Immigrants from abroad	/	11	104	172	224	1353
Share*	/	0.0	0.5	0.9	1.4	11.5
Pirot – Living and working abroad	936	1163	545	857	935	949
Share	1.4	1.7	0.8	1.3	1.6	1.9
Kučevo – Living and working abroad	1283	3530	3897	6068	6824	6248
Share	4.4	12.4	13.2	24.4	30.7	34.6

Note. *Share of the usual population in country.

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. *Migrations – Data by Municipalities and Cities, corresponding years.*

⁴ The number of persons abroad in census data could be interpreted only as a sample based on information obtained from registered persons in the country, mostly family members.

The shares of internal migrants in the Municipality of Kučevo until the 2011 Census were relatively low (on average 15% lower than in Pirot). Yet, data from the 2022 census show that the share of internal migrants has increased to 29.2%, and that internal migration now dominates, accounting for 73.5% of the total migration balance. The international migration of the population of Kučevo can certainly be labeled as “old” emigration, and the slowdown of external migration can be largely explained by the exhaustion of the migration potential.

Differences in the migration balance between Pirot and Kučevo are evident, and during most of the observed 60-year period, the Municipality of Kučevo saw more intense emigration (Table 5).

Table 5. Net migration balance rate

	1961–1971	1971–1981	1981–1991	1991–2002	2002–2011	2011–2022
Pirot (‰)	–5,7	–3,0	–2,1	–0,6	–3,2	–5,2
Kučevo (‰)	–10,7	–12,0	–10,7	–10,2	–6,3	–5,1

Note. The 1961 Census data does not show the number of residents outside the country because at that time, the phenomenon was negligible. In this sense, the real value of the migration balance in the period 1961–1971 may be slightly lower than shown in the table.

Source: Author's calculation based on the data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023. *Comparative Overview of Population Numbers – Municipalities and Settlements. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings; and data from Demographic Statistics, corresponding years.*

The average rate of the net migration balance in Pirot was –3.2‰, while in Kučevo it was –9.7‰. However, this does not mean that there was three times less migration in Pirot; rather, real similarities and differences can be seen precisely when comparing the migration balance of the rural areas of these two SGUs. However, calculating the migration balance by the vital statistics method, besides the available data on the natural increase at the settlement level, required an estimation of the natural increase for the period from the critical moment of the Census in 1961 to 12/31/1962. The estimated natural increase in the mentioned period for Pirot villages is 527, and for Kučevo villages, 81. So, the number of inhabitants from the rural area of Pirot decreased through migration by almost 23,000 inhabitants, and in Kučevo by slightly over 12,000. At the same time, the average annual rate of migration balance in the villages of Pirot was –12.7‰, while in the villages of Kučevo it was –11.4‰. The scope of emigration from Pirot villages was slightly higher, however, in the first decade of the observed period, the level of emigration had the features of an exodus when almost half of the observed migration decline occurred (48.9%). The villages of Kučevo

experienced a similar fate, but the high intensity of emigration lasted longer than four decades, ranging between -12% and -14% , while in the villages of Pirot, the rate of migration balance dropped from the initial -25% during the 1960s to -1.6% until 2002 (Table 6).

Table 6. Net migration balance in rural area of Pirot and Kučevo in the period 1991–2022

Net migration balance	1961–1971	1971–1981	1981–1991	1991–2002	2002–2011	2011–2022
Pirot – Average population	44563	36110	29983	25164	21128	16901
Kučevo – Average population	24961	21834	18770	15800	12937	10033
Pirot – Natural increase	1054	–1298	–2566	–3669	–3091	–2442
Kučevo – Natural increase	295	–74	–689	–755	–2285	–2318
Pirot – Net migration balance	–11245	–5417	–2972	–432	–879	–2042
Kučevo – Net migration balance	–3365	–3110	–2255	–2241	–445	–761
Pirot – Annual NMB rate (%)	–25.2	–15.0	–9.9	–1.6	–4.4	–11.0
Kučevo – Annual NMB rate (%)	–13.5	–14.2	–12.0	–12.9	–3.6	–6.9

Source: Author's calculation based on the data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023. *Comparative Overview of Population Numbers – Municipalities and Settlements. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings; and data from Demographic Statistics, corresponding years.*

The following graph shows the net migration balance in the period 1961–2022, separately for the rural area, and separately for the total population in both SGUs (Figure 1). Figure 1 clearly shows that the bulk of emigration from the villages of Pirot went towards the city center until the 1990s, when, due to the economic crisis and the depletion of the demographic potential, this wave weakened. During the crisis of the 1990s, the urban settlement itself began to record a negative migration balance, and in the second decade of the 21st century, migration was increasingly directed outside the territory of the City of Pirot.

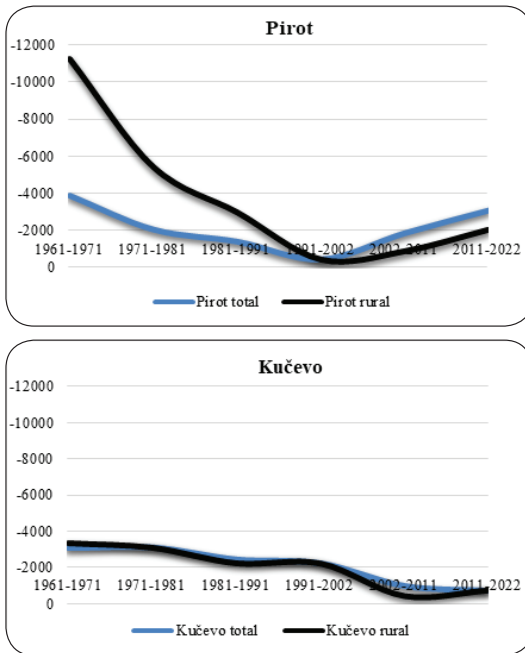


Figure 1. Net migration balance in rural and total areas of Pirot and Kučevo in 1961–2022.

On the other hand, migration from the Kučevo villages never went dominantly to the urban settlement but abroad, with the most significant feature that it was constant and undiminished, as attested by the growing numbers (and shares) of people outside the country.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

Migrations in Pirot and Kučevo from the 1960s onward are the result of the specific socio-economic context in which these migrations were initiated. In this primarily agricultural area (parts of Šopluk and Homolje, including the southern and south-eastern parts of the SGU Kučevo on the northern side of the Homolje Mountains), extensive sheep and goat farming dominated until the middle of the 20th century, while land cultivation was much less prevalent due to the specifics of the relief and poor soil. The form of animal husbandry did not differ, but the main difference was an existent tradition of “pečalba” (seasonal wage labor far from the place of origin) in Ponišavlje and Pirot since the late 18th century, where men aged 18 to 50 migrated primarily to the neighboring Wallachia and Bulgaria in early March or later in spring and returned in November: “We used to go to *pečalba* around Mladenci, March 22, or around Đurđevdan, May 6. Seasonal workers returned from *pečalba* after Mitrovdan (November 8). Everyone went to *pečalba*, craftsmen, bricklayers, and apprentices” (Predrag

Ćirić, seasonal worker from Gostuša). This practice lasted until 1912/13, when pečalba spontaneously stopped, although it remained internally present until World War II (Nikolić 1974; Hristov 2015).

Migration was uncommon in Kučevo until the mid-1960s, when the population was mainly engaged in sheep field farming. According to the testimonies of the interviewees, during the 19th century, migration flowed from hamlets to villages. "People moved from villages during the time of Captain Miša Anastasijević primarily because of the purchase of lamb skins and cheese". LJ. D. (b. 1948). The dependence of the people of Kučevo on sheep and goat breeding is visible in the locals' stories and testimonies. According to M.J. (b. 1949), who lives in Voluja, the hamlet had a few dozen houses, people resettled during the 1960s. "Some went to Voluja to be closer to Majdanpek and Kučevo, and some went abroad from Voluja; we sold the sheep and only kept a few for our own needs".

The exclusive reliance on sheep and goat breeding represented a particular economic vulnerability of this part of the population. To understand the changes that led to the waning of field farming and growing industrialization, as the preconditions for migration, we must refer to the laws and bylaws introduced after World War II. One of the most important acts was the "Regulation on the prohibition of keeping goats in free grazing," introduced in 1948 (Knebl 1978), resulting in a drastic decrease of livestock in "bačije" (a form of cooperative field farming of sheep) and severe deterioration of the locals' socioeconomic status. Before World War II, there were almost 3 million goats in the territory of the SFRY, with domestic Balkan goats predominantly present in extensive farming. In 1948, there were 1,300,000 goats, and then the Law introduced the prohibition of keeping goats in free grazing to protect forested areas. However, a certain number of white goats remained, whose breeding the Law allowed under certain conditions NaDrugiPogled. 17.7.2022. Accessed: August 3, 2025. Extensive goat farming was more prevalent than sheep farming in poor areas as a cheap source of meat for the population. Also, land consolidation (*komasacija*) and the nationalization of agricultural land affected the socioeconomic status of peasants, primarily by reducing their plots of land, making sheep and goat field farming almost impossible. During the 1950s and 1960s, rapid industrialization followed, leaving the industry of Kučevo much less developed and with a much lower need for labor compared to the Majdanpek Mining Basin, which attracted a significant number of workers from the municipality of Kučevo. A modest need for industrial labor, agrarian overpopulation, low educational levels, poor knowledge of the Serbian language among the Vlachs, and a series of bilateral agreements on organized labor emigration of the SFRY with foreign countries directed the migration from Kučevo villages abroad. It is indicative that in most villages, the interviews were very similar and the stories are reminiscent of each other, typically stating that, due to poor education or "having not spent a single day at school," they went abroad because they could not get a job in the newly

founded local companies. According to numerous interlocutors during the field research conducted in Rudna Glava⁵, because of the large number of sheep, many Vlachs born in the first half of the 20th century did not attend school at all, or went only to the third grade of primary school, and some went even less.

At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, companies that later became famous throughout the SFRY were founded in eastern Serbia, such as Prvi Maj Pirot, ŠIK-Kučevo, Rudnik Bakra Majdanpek, Zlatara Majdanpek, and EI Niš. This period also saw the revival of the tire factory Tigar in Pirot. These companies initiated micro-migrations from the countryside to the city, as well as migrations from the SFRY abroad. In both municipalities under scrutiny, Kučevo and Pirot, the rural population migrated to cities and industrial centers (Pirot, Majdanpek, rarely to Kučevo) in search of a better life, abandoning traditional sheep farming. The elderly and low-skilled workers remained in the countryside, e.g., in the villages of Kučevo. Due to the large surplus of unqualified labor that Kučevo could not absorb, these people went abroad for “temporary work”. The main peculiarity of these early waves of labor migration from the SFRY was their actors, young and healthy rural men who lived modestly in the country of immigration. Their wives joined them later, while the children mostly stayed home under their grandparents’ care (Kovačević & Krstić 2011). These international economic migrants in the Kučevo region were usually called “guest workers” (*gastarbajteri*), while in the Pirot region, migrants were mostly internal industrial workers who were the bearers of the deagrarianization process. This type of in-demand worker and the situation in the native region were the most important drivers of the emigration from the Kučevo and Pirot villages during the first wave of migration in the 1960s.

During the interviews, it was confirmed that the poorest categories, who no one wanted to employ, predominantly went abroad. They thought that their departure would be temporary and that they would return, but few decided to make such a move in northeastern Serbia, in contrast to Ponišavlje and Pirot, where the majority returned, albeit not to their villages but to the city of Pirot. An important reason for returning from abroad was the success of the local companies Tigar and Prvi Maj Pirot. Also, they had acquired formal education, unlike the people from Kučevo, whose mother tongue was Vlach. Generations of Vlachs born before the 1950s “didn’t know a single word of the Serbian language”, and many of them never completed primary education. Elders did not allow children to attend school because they needed labor on their farms. Another reason for dropping out of education was the existing ban on the Vlach language in schools (Durlić 2020).

⁵ Petrija Repedžić, Milenko Petrović, Branislav Repedžić, Katarina Strešić, Milutin Šalarević, Ruža Adamović, Đorđe Adamović, Božidar Šalarević and many others.

On the other side, in Ponišavlje, according to V.J. (b. 1944) from Pirot, a native of the village of Nišor, the main reason for returning from abroad was the development of the Tigar tire factory: "I went to France; I worked there as a bricklayer, we struggled, we all lived in one apartment, and we were there for several years; many of us from Pirot went to France, but we all returned and started working at Tigar".

In the village of Gostuša, during the celebration of the village patron saint, interviews about the reasons for leaving the village were conducted with several interlocutors. Here are some of the most indicative parts:

Why should we stay in the village? When Tigar started working, many left, but we also had a lot of sheep, and now imagine, I have no road, and a guy who works at Tigar comes by car. So, I am a shepherd, and he tops up a full car of sheep and leaves. And he got an apartment from the company! Of course we all wanted to leave; many went to Pirot, but they also went to France, and when they came home, they were the bosses. There were 100.000 sheep in Vrtibog; there was also dairy, hard work. He came, you were struggling, and he took what you were struggling for; we didn't have a road; there was no road then, and the bus left us in Lukanja. Many had to walk to Pirot. Now we gather to celebrate the holiday, and we are coming back, he came from Belgrade to celebrate the patron saint, and he left a long time ago. There is no one in the village, what is there, when you don't have a store, you have nowhere to buy things. What is there to return to? We didn't invest in the house, just basic maintenance now and then. What should I invest in when it is this old, for whom, there are no tourists, no one passing by. These weekenders come, they come for the weekend to mow a bit and that's it.

Better living standards in the city and guaranteed housing and prestige created the preconditions for emerging differences in migration, as well as in the relationship of the population of these two areas with their place of origin. In Ponišavlje and Stara Planina, we now have "weekenders" who live and work in Pirot but visit their old houses occasionally. For example, in Pakleštica, houses are being renovated, but no new ones are being built; the facades of most houses in the village have been repaired, which is not the case with other Stara planina villages. When asked "Why is it like that?", the inhabitants of Stari Zavoj, J. K. (b. 1961) and V.M. (b. 1947), answered that "they were more educated". This shows a distinction between *us* and *them*, i.e., the educated vs. the uneducated, the "inner others". We can also notice "inner others" in Kučevo, whose presence is reflected in the construction of multi-storey houses and overdecorated courtyards, mausoleums, etc. In Kučevo, there was constant awareness that work abroad was temporary and that they would return. This was supported by the existence of renovated rural houses and new ones built under Western influences, forming a new ethnological-architectural phenomenon typical for guest workers in north-eastern Serbia, in contrast to south-eastern Serbia, where native houses were not renovated but abandoned (Image 1).



Image 1. Decoration on a courtyard gate in Brodica (Kučevo) and the street view in Rsovci (Pirót).

Source: Private archive of Vladimir Petrović, and <https://planine.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/DSCN00081.jpg>

During the industrialization process, mass emigration from Pirót villages to the city enabled a permanent solution to these people's housing problems through the allocation of publicly owned apartments. These apartments could be bought into private ownership during the 1990s, making their emigration permanent. Migrants who made new homes in the city erased all traces of the impermanence of their migration and the sanctuary symbolism of the place of origin, mostly forever turning their backs on their birth homes, which had typically fallen into disrepair after decades of non-maintenance. On the other hand,

in almost all Kučevo villages, according to the testimonies, the reason for building large houses was to leave a house for future generations to live comfortably and not struggle as the previous generations had done.

5. Discussion

Migration from the villages of Pirot and Kučevo has its demographic and ethnological aspects. The demographic consequences of long-lasting migrations in both SGUs are manifested in the intensive demographic aging and emptying of the villages. The region of Southern and Eastern Serbia is the starting point of the most numerous emigrations in our country, accounting for more than 35% of total emigration (Bašić 2015). On the other hand, the ethnological change reflected in the migrants' identity transformation is best manifested by their changed relationship to their place of origin. International migrants' investment in houses later became disproportionate and eccentric, as they continued to invest in bigger and bigger houses, resembling towers and castles. These structures conspicuously stand out in the village, signalling a message to the community about the family's wealth acquired in the West (Antonijević 2013). In contrast, internal migrants, like "pečalbari" decades ago, rarely showed such a need for status affirmation in their place of origin (Hristov 2015; Liubenov 2019).

The initial driver of migration in both areas was the suppression of sheep and goat field farming, but the characteristics of the migrants themselves were different. For example, according to the 1961 Census, in the Municipality of Kučevo, 46% of the population over the age of 10 had no schooling, and 36% were illiterate, whilst in Pirot, the corresponding shares were 33% and 22%. The extremely unfavorable educational structure and high illiteracy rates in the Kučevo villages made its inhabitants an undesirable labor force in the relatively scarce Kučevo industry. Essentially, the root of the "unequal employment opportunities" of the population of the Kučevo region was not knowing the Serbian language and the widespread resistance of the Vlachs of that time to education in the Serbian language (Durlić 2020). In addition to the usual economic motives, emigration flows are also influenced by cultural and linguistic closeness with compatriots in the home countries (Bašić 2015). However, it should be emphasized that nowadays, bilingualism (parallel use of the Vlach and Serbian languages) is almost universal among the Vlachs in Serbia (Knežević 2013; Bašić 2015; Durlić 2020). This type of "obstacle" to employment among the population from Pirot did not exist; however, during the 1960s, there was an initial emigration wave abroad, although less numerous than in Kučevo. It is interesting that in 1971, of the total number of emigrants abroad in the Municipality of Pirot, 56% started from villages, while in the Municipality of Kučevo, as much as 96% of persons working/staying abroad came from the countryside. In other words,

all emigration from the municipality of Kučevo started from the villages. Yet, the few people working/staying abroad from the villages of Pirot did not in any way mean a smaller volume of emigration, but rather that emigration mostly went towards the urban settlement of Pirot. For example, according to the 2002 Census, 35.2% of the population born in the villages of the Municipality of Pirot moved to the town of Pirot, while only 5.8% moved from the Kučevo villages to the urban settlement of Kučevo. As the urban settlement of Kučevo did not appear as an attractive destination, emigrants from rural areas predominantly went abroad or to other larger cities in Serbia. In contrast, due to the high concentration of industry and a high demand for labor, the City of Pirot literally “sucked in” the population of the surrounding villages, and any excess labor typically migrated to larger economic centers in the country, but not abroad, as they did not struggle with a language barrier and had a better qualification structure.

Processes of industrialization and urbanization were significant drivers of migration. Still, the shift of the population from agricultural to non-agricultural activities after World War II did not have too much of an impact on the Vlachs in the country, who rarely left rural areas. Thus, according to the last five population censuses, the share of the rural population among Vlachs ranged between 84% and 92%, reaching as high as 92.3% in Kučevo in 2022. The scale of the rural exodus in these two SGUs is especially apparent in the migrant structure of the male population, because 86% of all household heads of rural households in Southern and Eastern Serbia are men. This is particularly indicative of the high prevalence of the patriarchal model in the rural environment in Serbia, where the heir of the “lineage” and the family farm is almost always a male descendant (Rajković 2014). The censuses of 2011 and 2022 recorded that in the Municipality of Kučevo, more than four-fifths of men have lived in the same place since birth, while in the City of Pirot, this share was about two-thirds. However, given the rarity of male migration from the city to the countryside, it could be that only 11% of rural men moved to the urban settlement of Kučevo, while as many as 40% of all rural men moved to the City of Pirot. We can connect this phenomenon in the Pirot area to the centuries-old need of the highland population, due to the scarcity of resources, to go to the lowlands either seasonally for “pečalba” or for permanent settlement (Krstić 2022). Emigration from the Pirot villages was already very intense in the first observed decade, accounting for half of the entire migration loss of rural areas, and the permanent character of these migrations is confirmed by the few returnees. In terms of identity, the move from the village to the nearby city did not represent a drastic change that would trigger a strengthening of the connection with the place of origin as a key point of identity preservation. Also, the temporal distance of leaving the place of origin made this connection even weaker. Internal migration from villages to cities typically resulted in an identity dilemma that waned over time under the influence of the

city as an effective means of acculturation, the transition from rural to urban identity, and the weakening of the connection with the place of origin (Erman 1998; Creed & Ching 1997).

As for international migration, the main senders of remittances are first-generation migrants investing in the purchase of land, the construction or purchase of real estate, or the reconstruction of existing facilities and planning their return to Serbia (Lerch et al. 2007). Migration from the Kučevo villages flowed abroad with an initial wave of emigration similar in intensity to the one that continued until the end of the 20th century, resulting in a vast majority of first-generation migrants. Additionally, the scope of the return stream far exceeds the corresponding phenomenon in the Pirot region, reaching as much as 11.5% of the total population in the country in 2022. The idea of “temporariness” of going abroad, although not fully realized, never ceased to exist. This is especially noticeable in efforts to preserve identity abroad and to showcase one’s “success” in the homeland (Antonijević, Banić Grubišić & Krstić 2011). Attachment to a place is an important identity weft in modern society, but regardless of depopulation, it stands out as a specific resource potential of small settlements (Petrović, Backović & Petrović 2017). Guest workers have adopted the values of Western culture, criticizing the poor working habits and conservatism of their compatriots in the place of origin. With their new identity, they see themselves as more valuable and closer to foreigners, striving to stand out from their compatriots by excessive house-building and luxury consumption (Toma 2020; Antonijević, Banić Grubišić & Rašić 2021). Socio-economic and socio-psychological factors of the demographic behavior of the Vlachs, which were manifested as a desire for a wealthier lifestyle through the traditional “one child” model from the end of the 19th century (Knežević & Gligorijević 2023) up to the modern “guest workers” in the middle of the last century, exclusively originated from the village because the Municipality of Kučevo never evolved into a center of economic development and social transformation in terms of defining standards, ethical norms, and demographic behavior ideals. The specific demographic behavior of the Vlach population, in addition to the undeniable economic motive, certainly has a deep-rooted and multi-layered ethno-anthropological, cultural, and historical basis.

6. Conclusion

Demographic change highly influences the transformation of the local environment through natural and migration patterns. In this text, we have unequivocally shown that the features of migration in the two observed local environments had an almost opposite effect on the relationship of migrants with their place of origin and birth home. However, the roots of this different relationship did

not stem only from the researched modern migration, but went back to the distant past, which also saw migration shifts. There was already a long tradition of “pečalba” in Pirot, which fostered a certain propensity of the population to leave their home place. In the descriptions of the Šopska and Moravsko-Vardarska migration currents, the tendency of this part of the population to easily break ties with their homeland was highlighted as an important ethno-psychological characteristic. Conversely, the population of the Kučevo region, though itself a product of earlier migrations, was disinclined to migrate in the last two centuries until modern times. In the early 1960s, both SGUs were mostly rural, so the main transformation of the local environment began precisely in the villages. Regardless of the initial migration abroad, the rural population of Pirot found their destination in the rapidly industrializing urban settlement itself, which was not the case with Kučevo. The population of the Pirot villages was better educated, while the predominantly Vlach population of the Kučevo villages was highly illiterate and had no formal education. One of the causes was not knowing the Serbian language and dropping out of school, resulting in non-competitive employment opportunities in the industry of Kučevo. At the very beginning of the observed period, the population of the Pirot villages left their place of origin en masse, finding jobs in the local industry and building a new life in the city, while the inhabitants of the Kučevo villages took advantage of the opportunity of legal labor migration and began their decades-long migration abroad.

The answer to the question of the different relationships with the place of origin and the birth home may lie in the formation of the specific identity of the migrating population. The population that left the Pirot villages did not go far. Their migration took on a permanent character. They were among their own people in the city, using the same language and building permanent new lives. The myth of returning to the birth home was never a part of the migration process in the Pirot area. Conversely, the population of the Kučevo villages went abroad with the intention of not starting a new life but improving their old one. Although their migration took on the appearance of permanence, the idea of returning was always an integral part of their lives, wherefore they invested in their family homes in the place of origin. Living abroad made their connection with the homeland an important identity feature. On the flipside, they became “internal others” in their homeland, materializing the meaning and purpose of their departure through excessive and irrational investment in housing construction.

Through a unique combination of demographic and ethnological methods, we utilized demographic analysis to provide solid evidence for understanding and explaining ethnological phenomena of identity transformation. Scientific examples of the simultaneous use of quantitative demography and qualitative ethnology in describing the process of rural area transformation in Serbia are scarce. Such an approach arguably benefits both perspectives, the demographic

and the ethnological. Not only demographic characteristics of actors, but also the geographical characteristics of their migrations, shaped their identity and relationship with the place of origin. Nevertheless, this micro-environment case study (exercise) has its limitations and shortcomings, as seen in the lack of in-depth geographical analysis. Future research of similar processes should include relief and altitude comparisons between villages, traffic connections, and soil characteristics as geographical factors relevant to agricultural activity and rural life, as well as important drivers of shifts in the locals' economic activity and migration patterns.

The similarity in unfavorable demographic characteristics of the villages in these two areas of eastern Serbia and the obvious differences in the appearance and wealth of individual farms prompted us to attempt to discover the primary cause of the different relationship of the population with their birthplace. It is hard to compare these research results with similar studies (and other parts of Serbia) without an in-depth historical, geographical, and social understanding of the local environment. However, if we do attempt a comparison, we must not go beyond comparable historical-geographical and socioeconomic entities. It would be insightful to identify the drivers of different relationships of migrants with their place of origin, for example, between Banat and Srem, Šumadija and Pomoravlje areas, or between the Serbian and Romani population or the Serbian and Hungarian.

To conclude, the demographic fate of the Pirot and Kučevo villages is probably similar, but there are now obvious differences in the appearance of these villages, architecture, and the degree of poverty. The Pirot villages have not undergone significant transformation in the last 60 years; new residential construction is rare, and people live in old houses. On the other hand, "bačije" and "čatmare" (houses made from timber and mud), ubiquitous in the pictures of the Kučevo villages from the early 1960s, are rare today. Much of the scarce population and returnees to the villages of Kučevo spend their lives surrounded by plaster lions and eagles who watch them from monumental courtyard gates, sequestered in spacious houses with colorful facades. On one side it is "čatma", stone and chaff, and on the other, marble, wrought iron, and video surveillance of the newbuilds.

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