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Mihai Hotea

PhD in Geography, Lecturer, Department of Human Geography and Tourism,
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Sighetu Marmaţiei Extension,
6 Avram Iancu Street, 435500 Sighetu Marmaţiei, Romania
e-mail: mihai.hotea@ubbcluj.ro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8113-1971>

Nicolaie Hodor

PhD in Geography, Lecturer, Department of Physical and Technical Geography,
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca,
5–7 Clinicilor Street, 400006 Cluj-Napoca, Romania
e-mail: nicolaie.hodor@ubbcluj.ro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0109-2456>

Vasile Timur Chiş

Researcher, The Maramureş Museum,
15 Libertăţii Square, 435500 Sighetu Marmaţiei, Romania
e-mail: timurcvi@yahoo.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1102-0487>

DYNAMICS AND STRUCTURE OF THE UKRAINIAN POPULATION IN THE MARAMUREŞ LAND (ROMANIA)

This study examines the dynamics and structural characteristics of the Ukrainian population in the Maramureş Land (Romania), with a particular focus on predominantly Ukrainian communes. Drawing on historical data for 1880–2021, census results from 2011 and 2021, spatial analysis, and field observations, it evaluates long-term numerical trends, age and sex composition, economic profile, educational attainment, and religious affiliation.

The results indicate three major phases: sustained growth until the mid-twentieth century, accelerated expansion during the socialist period, and marked decline after 1990, driven primarily by external migration and decreasing birth rates. Between 2011 and 2021, the total number of inhabitants decreased significantly across all analysed communes, accompanied by population ageing and a high dependency ratio. The economic structure remains dominated by primary activities, while services and tourism are weakly represented. Educational attainment is characterized by the predominance of lower and secondary levels, with a limited share of university graduates. Spatial concentration along valley corridors has supported cultural continuity and linguistic persistence, yet mountainous isolation and limited accessibility have constrained economic diversification. The study also highlights the presence of a distinct Ruthenian component and small Hutsul groups, partly underrepresented in official statistics. Overall, the findings underline the interdependence between physical environment, historical settlement patterns, and contemporary socio-economic transformations shaping the Ukrainian minority in this mountain region.

Keywords: *Ukrainian minority, geodemography, demographic decline, external migration, spatial analysis, territorial structure, mountain communes, Maramureş Land.*

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Introduction. The analysis of national minorities from the perspective of human geography has become an important line of inquiry, given the role of ethnic diversity in shaping territorial population structures and demographic change. In this context, the Ukrainian community in Romania provides a particularly relevant case study through its compact distribution in certain areas, mainly mountainous and hilly, as well as through its strong capacity to preserve cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions.

Located in northern Romania, close to the border with Ukraine, the Maramureş Land is predominantly

Romanian in terms of ethnic composition (Ilieş, 2007). As part of the present-day county bearing the same name, it is inhabited mainly by Romanians (142,708 out of 191,385 inhabitants, or approximately 74.6%). At the same time, the area includes localities with Hungarian or ethnically mixed populations, especially along the Tisa Valley, as well as settlements where Ukrainians, established here following trans-Carpathian migrations that took place several centuries ago, account for significant and often majority shares.

According to the 2021 census, this pattern is found in seven communes comprising thirteen villages:



Poienile de sub Munte, where Ukrainians represent 90.8% of the total population, Repedea (88.7%), Ruscova (84.7%), Remeti (70.1%), Bistra (67.0%), as well as the communes of Bocicoiu Mare (the villages of Crăciunești and Lunca la Tisa) and Rona de Sus (Rona de Sus and Coștiui), the latter representing a particular case discussed later in the article. The earliest available record for Poienile de sub Munte indicates that in 1353 the settlement had only 13 inhabitants (Beuca & Zebreniuc, 2007).

These features give the area particular scientific relevance, as they allow for the examination of factors underlying long-term territorial continuity, including spatial concentration, relative geographic isolation, historical persistence, and community cohesion. Romania's legal and institutional framework also supports minority rights and contributes to the

preservation of cultural diversity (Parlamentul României, 2003; Guvernul României, 2019).

Against the background of recent socio-economic transformations, external migration, and population decline affecting most mountain areas of Romania, the study of these communities offers a valuable perspective on the preservation of local distinctiveness. This process must be assessed within a cross-border setting shaped by complex geopolitical dynamics. From a spatial perspective, the localities under study are concentrated mainly in the northern and north-eastern sectors, forming a compact cluster, with the exception of the commune of Remeti, situated in the north-western part and territorially separated from the rest of the study area. Most of them are located along the Tisa Valley, either near the river itself or along its tributaries (Figure 1).

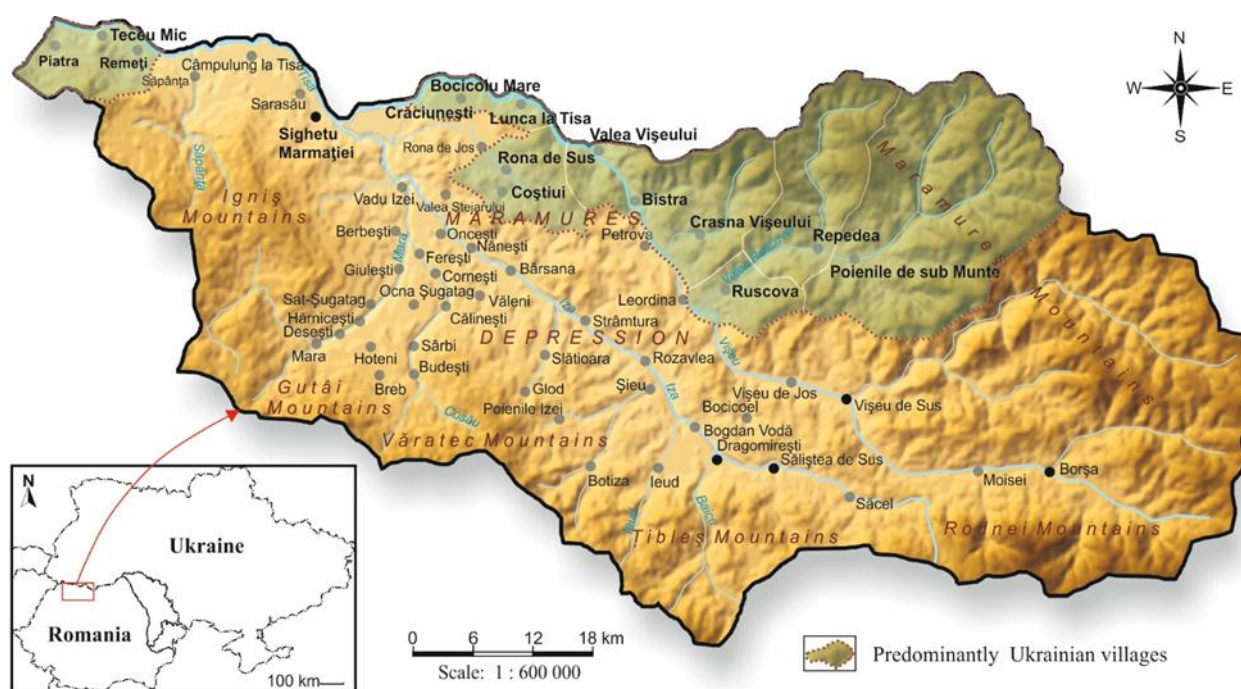


Fig. 1. Location of the study area in the Maramureș Land, Romania
Source: Author's cartographic processing based on Ilieș, Ilieș & Hotea (2013)

Fragmented relief, limited accessibility, and a traditionally self-sufficient economy have long favoured the preservation of local particularities. At the same time, the short distance between the two groups of localities (approximately 25 km), despite their separation by predominantly Romanian or ethnically mixed settlements, allows for functional territorial connections.

Historical and geographical background. Geodemographic structures must be interpreted in relation to the natural territorial framework. The communes with a predominantly Ukrainian population are located in a complex mountainous area marked by intramontane depressions, fragmented relief, narrow longitudinal valleys, and extensive forest cover. These physical-geographical features have profoundly shaped local socio-economic configurations, influencing both relative isolation and the preservation of ethnic identity, as well as the historical rhythms of development.

The concentration of settlements within these confined valley corridors explains the present-day pattern of population distribution and the persistence of compact settlement nuclei, in contrast to the more dispersed habitation typical of other mountain areas.

Large parts of the administrative territories of these localities fall within the Maramureș Mountains Natural Park and Natura 2000 sites. This gives the region considerable ecological value while simultaneously limiting construction expansion and the development of intensive economic activities. Consequently, the local economy remains strongly dependent on natural resources – forests, alpine pastures, and mountain agricultural land – thus favouring forestry and mountain farming.

The presence of vernacular built heritage, local cultural events, and mountain landscapes points to significant tourism potential, still insufficiently

harnessed at the regional scale, which could provide an alternative path of development for villages affected by population decline and external migration. The existence of relatively isolated hamlets also contributes to smaller average dwelling sizes than in neighbouring localities; in Poienile de sub Munte, for instance, the average dwelling size is only 33.35 m² (Hotea, 2020).

Overall, the geographical specificities of the area help explain both the dispersed distribution of settlements and the persistence of ethnocultural cohesion, as well as recent social vulnerabilities generated by limited infrastructure and restricted economic opportunities. The area thus offers a distinct example of the interdependence between natural conditions and the evolution of an ethnic minority community.

The presence of Ukrainians in the region is the result of a complex historical process that unfolded in several stages and was closely linked to political, economic, and ethnic dynamics. The earliest evidence for the arrival of East Slavic populations dates back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the reorganisation of noble estates and colonisation policies initiated by local elites favoured the establishment of the first permanent settlements (Filipaşcu, 1940; Popa, 1970).

After the departure of the Maramureş voivode Dragoş and the military forces that accompanied him, Teodor Koriatovici is said to have brought Ukrainian settlers from beyond the Carpathians into areas whose population had been greatly reduced by these movements (Filipaşcu, 1941; Iacob, 1994–1995; Ilieş, 1998). Two major migratory movements can thus be distinguished: a Romanian one directed eastward across the mountains, and another from Galicia toward Maramureş. The former contributed to the foundation of Moldavia as a state, while the latter helped shape a Slavic settlement area in the Carpathian space (Mihalyi de Apşa, 1900; Popa, 1970).

Historiography also mentions the settlement of an important Ruthenian group brought by Voivode Ioan de Rozavlea to the Ruscova Valley, in the area of present-day Poienile de sub Munte, Repedea, and Ruscova (Mihalyi de Apşa, 1900). Some studies identify a further trans-Carpathian wave in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, composed of Hutsuls and Ruthenian groups originating from Galicia and Bukovina, associated with demographic pressures, economic hardship, and politico-military instability in their regions of origin (Petrovai, 2011, 2013). During this period, the ethnic structure of the communes of Repedea, Ruscova, and Poienile de sub Munte took shape, a process that can also be observed in other villages along the Vişeu and Tisa valleys.

The terminology used to designate this ethnic group has varied over time—“Ruthenian,” “Hutsul,” and, more recently, “Ukrainian”—each label reflecting distinct historical, administrative, or identity-related contexts (Petrovai, 2013). Pre-war and interwar censuses confirm their presence in Maramureş, while geographical studies emphasise the role of mountain relief, isolation, and the traditional economy in preserving language and culture (Hotea, 2020).

In summary, the emergence and consolidation of

these communities in the region should be understood as the outcome of successive migratory stages unfolding within a favourable geographical setting and under continuously changing historical circumstances.

Literature review and research gaps. The body of scholarship devoted to Ukrainians in Maramureş reflects a long-standing research tradition in history, ethnography, toponymy, and, more recently, human geography. It may be grouped into two broad directions: historical and onomastic contributions concerning the origins and formation of settlements, and contemporary studies addressing ethnicity, demographic structures, and spatial dynamics.

The medieval history of the region was examined in detail by Filipaşcu (1940) and Popa (1970), who highlighted the role of East Slavic populations in territorial organisation from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries onward. Their works emphasise the mechanisms of mountain colonisation, the relationships between local communities and politico-administrative elites, and the importance of Slavic toponymy in reconstructing the antiquity of settlement. In a similar vein, Vegesh and Horvat (1998) provide a synthesis of the evolution of villages in the study area and of the transformations generated by administrative changes within the Carpathian space.

More recent synthetic sources, such as the Encyclopedia of Ukraine (n.d.), underline the distinct role of Maramureş within the settlement area of Ukrainians in Romania, considering the region a historical area in which these communities took shape. Recent research has explored ethnicity and socio-cultural dynamics in a cross-border setting shaped by mobility and socio-political change (Zan, 2006; Lenio, 2009; Rendiuk, 2010), while studies in human geography have stressed the influence of the mountain environment and limited accessibility on ethnic continuity (Hotea, 2020). Recent anthropological investigations have also drawn attention to processes of identity redefinition associated with migration and social modernisation (Kosiek, 2015, 2023).

At the local level, settlement monographs constitute important sources for the analysis of spatial organisation and demographic change. Works devoted to the communes of Poienile de sub Munte (Beuca & Zebreniuc, 2007; Songot, 2015; Chiş & Popovici, 2022), Ruscova (Horvat & Horvat, 2005; Chiş, 2024), Bistra (Cureleac et al., 2011; Chiş, 2023), Bocicoiu Mare (Chiş, 2016; Hrinciuc, 2018), and Rona de Sus (Bout, 2010) provide detailed information on settlement configuration, numerical evolution, and cultural life, thereby complementing and refining the broader scientific literature.

The presence of Ukrainians in this area has also been examined by a number of Romanian scholars, including Meruţiu (1929), Morariu (1942a, 1942b), Dăncuş (1986), Raboca (1994), Iacob (1994–1995), Ilieş, A. (1998), Boar (2005), Pop, P. Gr. (2006), Ilieş, G. (2007), Tofan et al. (2015), and Hotea (2020), as well as by Hungarian authors as early as the late nineteenth century (Szilágyi et al., 1876).

Despite this substantial body of work, a critical reading of previous studies reveals several limitations:

the absence of detailed geodemographic analyses at the level of villages with a Ukrainian majority, the limited use of modern quantitative methodologies, and the lack of integrated spatial analyses addressing the relationship between the mountain environment, accessibility, and the maintenance of ethnic cohesion. Likewise, the links between cultural specificity, territorial organisation, and contemporary socio-economic transformation remain insufficiently explored, including the impact of external migration on local population characteristics.

Against this background, the present study proposes a detailed investigation that integrates territorial, social, and cultural perspectives in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of current spatial patterns and to support future research directions within the Romanian-Ukrainian cross-border area.

Purpose, objectives, and research hypotheses.

This study addresses the demographic situation of the Ukrainian population in the Maramureş Land and the territorial particularities of the communes where it forms the majority, with a focus on their spatial and cultural trajectories. It aims to delineate the area in which the Ukrainian community forms the dominant population group, to analyse its evolution over the period 1880–2021, and to assess structural characteristics by age, sex, economic activity, educational attainment, and religious affiliation. The research also examines the relationship between the mountain environment and limited accessibility in sustaining community cohesion, together with local cultural specificities and tourism potential.

The working hypothesis is that these localities display a distinct developmental pattern in comparison with county and national averages, reflecting a strong capacity to preserve their cultural identity. Their present demographic profiles are shaped by local conditions that favour social cohesion and the maintenance of the mother tongue. At the same time, geographic isolation and dense interpersonal networks contribute to the preservation of traditions and religious continuity.

Materials and methods. Data sources and analytical units. The methodological framework combines quantitative, cartographic, and qualitative approaches commonly used in human geography. The empirical basis of the study consists of official datasets provided by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), including population censuses, particularly those of 2011 and 2021, as well as demographic records available at the level of administrative-territorial units. The long-term perspective was complemented by pre-war and interwar sources, which make it possible to assess population change over extended historical intervals. In addition, works in history, ethnography, human geography, and anthropology were used to contextualise the specific characteristics of the region.

The commune constitutes the main unit of analysis (local administrative level), and case selection was based on the majority share of the Ukrainian population. Where the available data allowed, the investigation was supplemented by village-level observations in order to capture local territorial particularities more precisely. The comparability of historical series was ensured by relating the available data to the current administrative-territorial configuration.

Spatial and statistical analysis and GIS processing. The spatial analysis covered all communes included in the study, whose administrative boundaries were digitised and processed within a Geographic Information System (GIS). The procedure involved mapping, assessing the degree of population concentration, and identifying intra-regional differences. Cartographic representations were produced on the basis of official statistical data, maps, and regional geographic atlases.

GIS processing involved standard cartographic operations, the integration of statistical attributes, and thematic classification in order to highlight territorial contrasts within the study area. The analysis employed a set of geodemographic indicators concerning long-term population dynamics, sex and age structure, including the morphology of the age pyramid, dependency ratio, active and inactive population, sectoral employment structure, educational attainment, and ethnic and religious composition, including the Ruthenian component.

The temporal comparison aimed to identify long-term changes in population structure, with particular emphasis on the more recent transformations reflected in census data. The results were compared with county and national averages in order to highlight the specific evolutionary features of the analysed region. Statistical indicators were first processed in spreadsheet-based software and subsequently integrated into the GIS environment. Their interpretation must also take into account possible distortions generated by temporary external migration and by changes in ethnic self-identification.

Field observations and qualitative elements. The quantitative investigation was complemented by field checks carried out during 2024–2025 in the localities of Remeți, Bocicoiu Mare, Repedea, Poienile de sub Munte, and Rona de Sus. Direct observations provided information on local socio-cultural dynamics, traditional economic activities, the role of infrastructure, and other rural features, while also helping to identify discrepancies between statistical data and realities observed in the field.

These qualitative elements were used to contextualise the statistical results and to support a more nuanced interpretation of present-day conditions.

Integrated geographical interpretation. The interpretation of the results was based on an integrated geographical approach that correlates population structures with physical-geographical factors (relief and accessibility), socio-economic processes (migration, labour market conditions, and types of economic activity), and local cultural and historical features. This interdisciplinary perspective makes it possible to assess demographic vulnerabilities, resilience to assimilatory pressures, and local territorial specificities without assuming direct causal relationships between the factors considered.

Results and discussion. *Demographic evolution in predominantly Ukrainian communes.* The geodemographic analysis highlights long-term population change, recent transformations, spatial distribution, and the specific patterns of predominantly

Ukrainian communes in the Maramureş Land, thereby outlining their current demographic dynamics and vulnerabilities.

Long-term demographic evolution. The evolution of the localities under study follows the general pattern of Carpathian mountain areas: sustained growth until the late twentieth century, followed by marked decline after 1990. The number of inhabitants nearly doubled between 1880 and 1956, under conditions of high birth rates and limited migration (Figure 2).

The period 1956–1992 represents the phase of maximum growth, when the population exceeded 38,000 inhabitants, a trend associated with improved medical

services and pronatalist policies. After 1992, a steady decrease was recorded, reaching 24,868 inhabitants in 2021, mainly as a result of external migration, declining birth rates, and population ageing.

This trajectory may be summarised in three stages: traditional growth, accelerated expansion, and post-socialist decline, highlighting the increasing demographic vulnerability of these communities.

Recent demographic decline (2011–2021). Between the 2011 and 2021 censuses, the total population decreased by 16.1%, a trend observed in all analysed cases (Figure 3), reflecting broader tendencies characteristic of isolated rural areas.

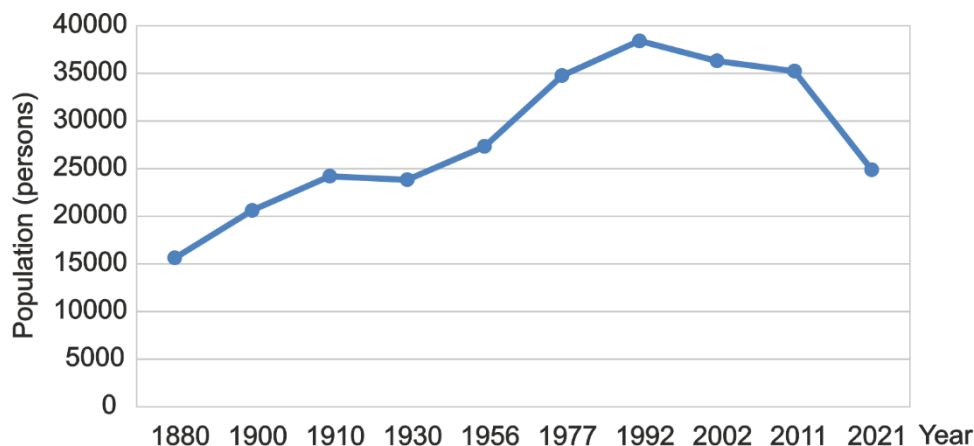


Fig. 2. Numerical evolution of the population in predominantly Ukrainian communes of the Maramureş Land
 Source: Author's processing based on population censuses, 1880–2021

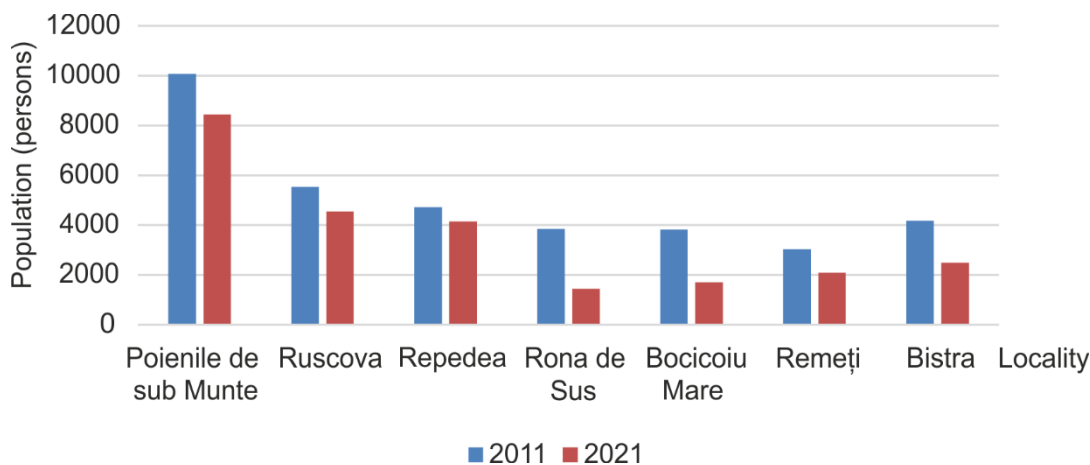


Fig. 3. Population evolution in predominantly Ukrainian communes of the Maramureş Land (2011–2021)
 Source: Author's processing of NIS census data (2011, 2021)

The sharpest declines were recorded in Rona de Sus (–55.1%), possibly influenced by statistical registration issues, Bistra (–29.8%), and Poienile de sub Munte (–17.1%), the largest locality with a Ukrainian population in Romania, which at one point exceeded 10,000 inhabitants. The other communes also registered moderate but constant decreases.

This decline results from prolonged external migration, limited economic opportunities, and the ageing process. Together, these tendencies reinforce broader national trends and raise concerns regarding

long-term viability.

Spatial distribution of Ukrainian population (2021). The 2021 census confirms strong spatial polarisation, with Ukrainians forming an absolute majority in only seven communes, while their share remains low across the region as a whole (Figure 4).

Outside these compact nuclei, their presence is dispersed and generally remains below 5%, reflecting processes of internal mobility and identity persistence beyond the traditional core areas of settlement.

The Ruthenian component in the ethnic structure.

The 2021 census indicates the presence of Ruthenians in the study area, accounting for 40.9% of the national total, with the largest concentrations in Bistra (296 persons) and Rona de Sus. Until 1941, this community was statistically recorded under the designation “Ruthenian,” while later the category “Ukrainian” was adopted. After 1990, some inhabitants returned to this earlier form of self-identification. The statistical

separation of the two categories may affect the interpretation of proportions, which is why the distinct analysis of the Ruthenian component contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the local situation.

Field research also confirms the presence of small Hutsul groups, insufficiently reflected in official statistics.

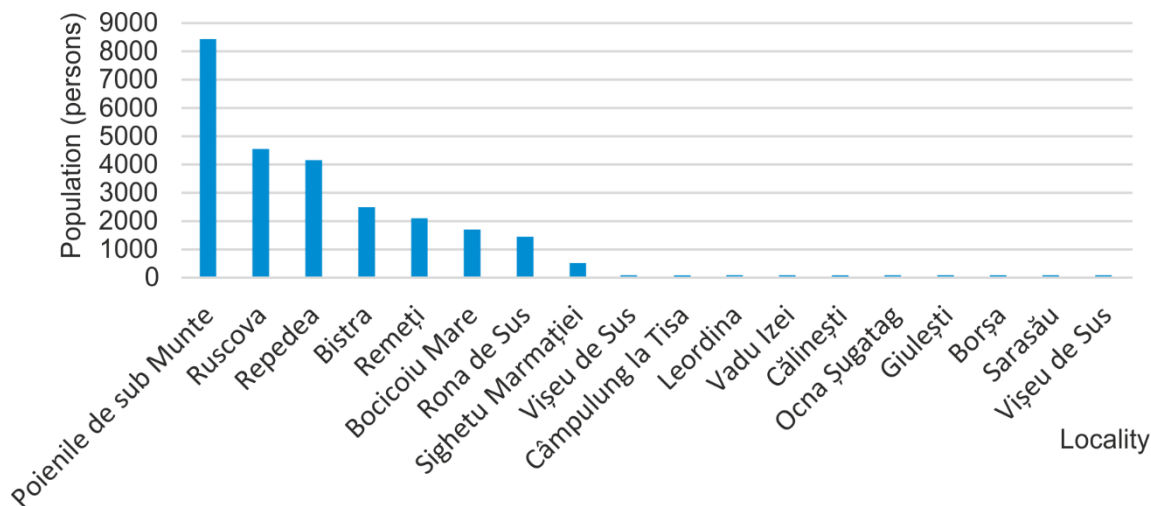


Fig. 4. Spatial distribution of the Ukrainian population in the Maramureș Land
Source: Author’s processing of NIS census data (2021)

Population structures. Population structures reflect both the rural mountain character of the area and the effects of recent transformations.

Sex structure. The sex structure shows an overall balance, although in some localities the share of males is slightly higher. No specific economic or social causes have been identified, and these differences appear to reflect natural age-related variation (Figure 5).

Age structure. Young people (0–19 years) account for 26.8% of the total population, adults (20–64 years) for 60.0%, and the elderly (65 years and over) for 13.2%, indicating an advanced demographic transition. The age pyramid confirms declining birth rates and the predominance of adult generations formed during periods of positive natural increase (Figure 6). Research conducted by Hotea (2020) further suggests that the share of young people tends to be higher than in neighbouring localities.

Occupational status. The active population accounts for only 29.4% of the total, while the inactive population exceeds 70%, consisting mainly of pupils, students, homemakers, and pensioners (Figure 7). This situation reflects limited labour-market opportunities and the persistence of traditional forms of rural economic organisation.

The high level of economic dependency places pressure on the employed population and accentuates local socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Economic activity structure. The economy remains dominated by agriculture and forestry (24.4%), followed by manufacturing and trade. Construction has a significant share, whereas public services and tourism are weakly represented, indicating a poorly diversified economic model typical of peripheral mountain regions (Figure 8).

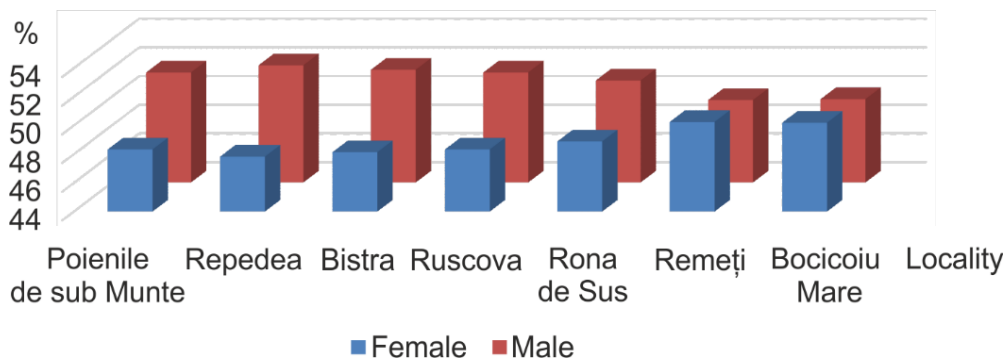


Fig. 5. Sex structure of the population in predominantly Ukrainian communes
Source: Author’s processing of NIS census data (2021)

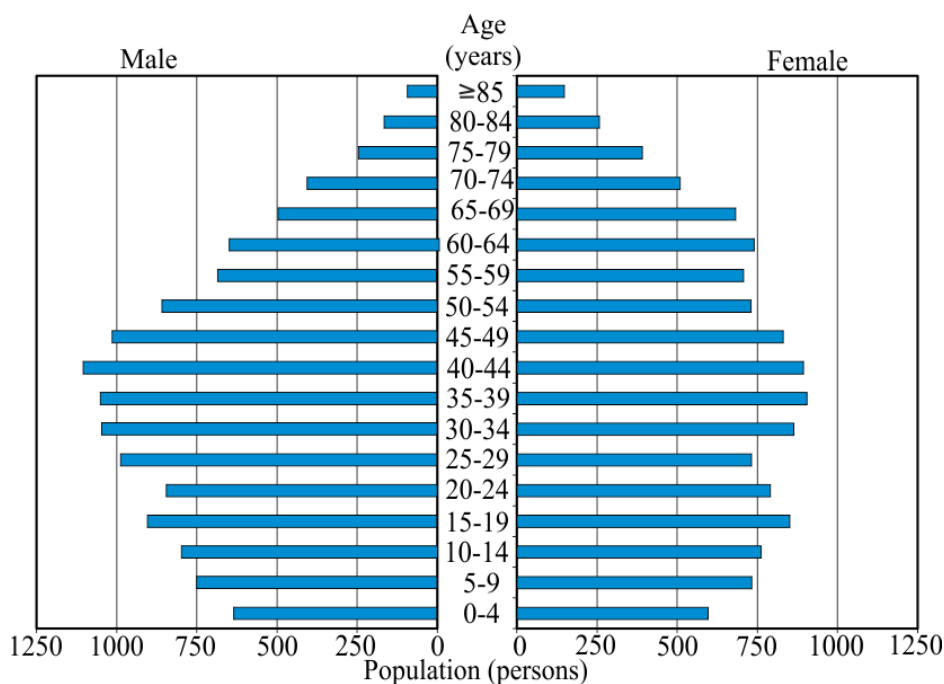


Fig. 6. Age-sex structure of the population in predominantly Ukrainian communes
 Source: Author's processing of NIS census data (2021)

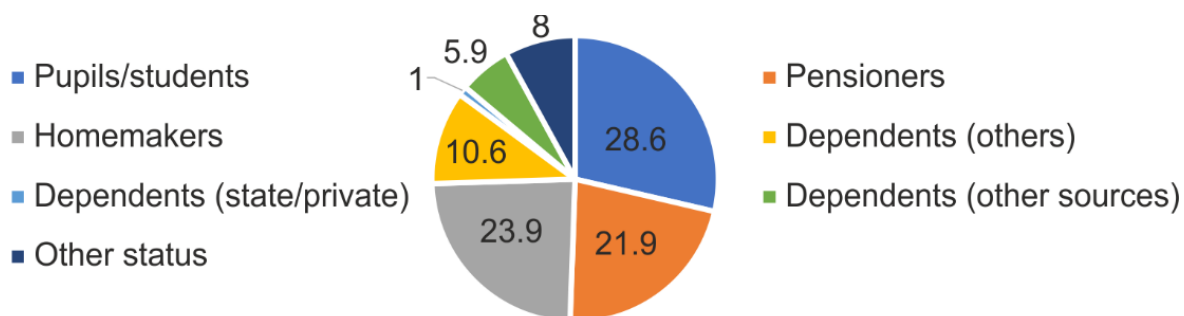


Fig. 7. Structure of the inactive population in predominantly Ukrainian communes
 Source: Author's processing of NIS census data (2021)

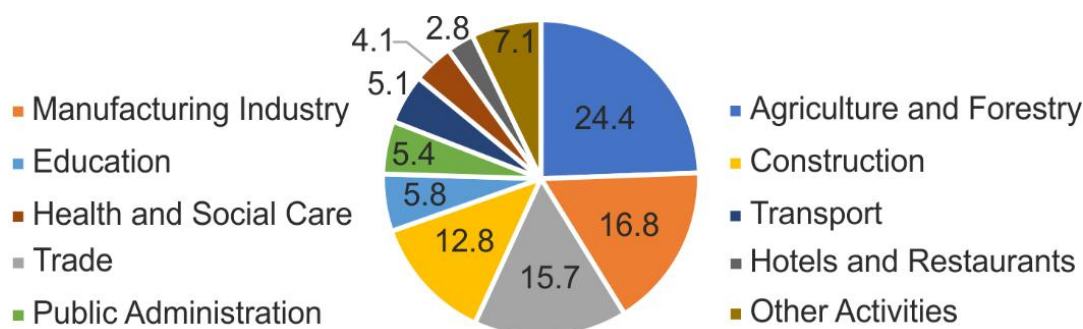


Fig. 8. Occupational structure of the population in predominantly Ukrainian communes
 Source: Author's processing of NIS census data (2021)

Educational structure. More than half of the inhabitants (51.3%) have completed at most lower secondary education, while 43.5% hold upper secondary, post-secondary, or vocational qualifications, values close to the county average and slightly above the national one. University graduates account for only 5.2%, a

considerably lower proportion than the national average (16%) and the county average (12.5%). These figures reflect the local economic profile and the orientation toward traditional activities that do not require higher education.

Religious structure. The religious structure is dominated by Orthodoxy (71.7%), and many communities continue to observe the Julian calendar for religious celebrations. Neo-Protestant denominations, among which Pentecostals have the highest share

(11.1%), indicate a more recent diversification, while the proportion of unavailable data is associated with external migration. Overall, the confessional pattern remains strongly polarised (Figure 9).

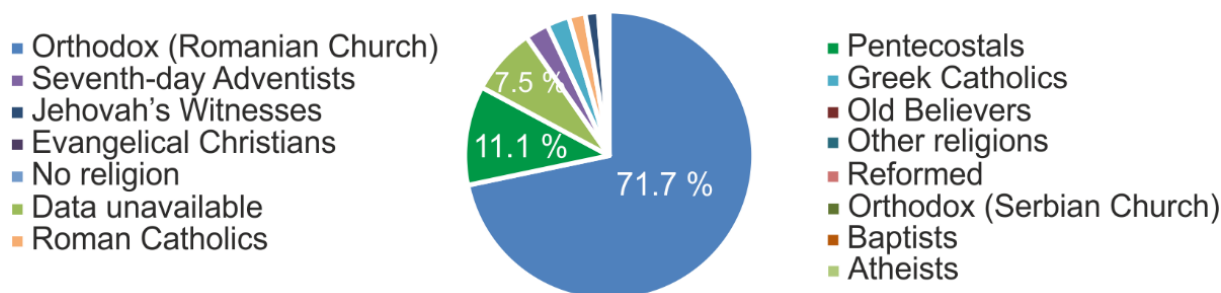


Fig. 9. Religious structure of the population in predominantly Ukrainian communes

Source: Author's processing of NIS census data (2021)

Conclusions and future research directions. The analysis of geodemographic structures and territorial particularities of predominantly Ukrainian communities in the Maramureş Land reveals a complex profile resulting from the long-term interaction of natural, historical, and socio-cultural factors. The area examined hosts one of the most compact minority populations in Romania, which has managed to preserve distinct identity features despite recent social transformations. The findings may serve as a starting point for comparative analyses in mountain regions characterised by ethnic diversity.

Population evolution reveals three major stages: sustained growth until the mid-twentieth century, accelerated development during the socialist period, and severe decline after 1990, driven mainly by external migration and decreasing birth rates. The most recent census confirms a considerable reduction in the number of inhabitants in all analysed communes, together with a deepening ageing process, with direct implications for the labour market and local economic sustainability.

Population structures — by sex, age, occupational status, economic branches, educational attainment, and religion — reflect the rural mountain character of this group of localities. The predominance of the primary sector, the relatively low share of the active population, the small proportion of university graduates, and the relatively homogeneous confessional profile describe a traditional society under pressure from economic and social change. At the same time, the existence of

educational institutions providing instruction in Ukrainian and the persistence of cultural traditions contribute to maintaining ethnic cohesion.

Geographical conditions — mountain relief, reduced accessibility, the presence of protected natural areas, and the preservation of long-standing agropastoral practices — have favoured the conservation of local cultural identity, while at the same time limiting economic diversification and the pace of territorial development.

The results point to the need for longitudinal demographic analyses at the level of each locality, qualitative investigations into language use and contemporary processes of identity redefinition, as well as comparative assessments between regions inhabited by Ukrainians in Romania and those in Ukraine, in order to capture similarities and differences generated by the border effect. Further systematic research is also needed on the valorisation of local development potential, especially in the fields of cultural tourism and ecotourism, alongside GIS-based analyses of territorial accessibility and land-use dynamics.

Overall, the study provides an integrated geographical perspective on the resilience and demographic vulnerabilities of predominantly Ukrainian communities in the Maramureş Land, thereby contributing to a better understanding of population and territorial dynamics in ethnically diverse mountain regions.

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Міхай Хотеа

доктор філософії з географії, викладач кафедри суспільної географії та туризму,
Університет імені Бабеши-Бояї, Клуж-Напока, Румунія
e-mail: mihai.hotea@ubbcluj.ro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8113-1971>

Ніколає Ходор

доктор філософії з географії, викладач кафедри фізичної і технічної географії,
Університет імені Бабеши-Бояї, Клуж-Напока, Румунія
e-mail: nicolaie.hodor@ubbcluj.ro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0109-2456>

Васіль Тімур Кіш

науковий співробітник, Музей Марамуреш, Сигіт-Мармароський, Румунія
e-mail: timurcvt@yahoo.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1102-0487>

ДИНАМІКА ТА СТРУКТУРА УКРАЇНСЬКОГО НАСЕЛЕННЯ У МАРМАРОЩИНИ (РУМУНІЯ)

У статті проаналізовано динаміку та структурні особливості українського населення в Мармарощині (Румунія), зосереджуючись на громадах із переважно українським населенням. Дослідження ґрунтується на статистичних матеріалах за 1880–2021 рр., даних переписів 2011 і 2021 років, просторовому аналізу та польових спостереженнях. Оцінено довготривалі зміни чисельності, вікову й статеву структуру, економічну зайнятість, освітній рівень і конфесійну належність.

Виявлено три основні етапи розвитку: стабільне зростання до середини ХХ ст., прискорене збільшення в соціалістичний період і виразне скорочення після 1990 р., зумовлене передусім зовнішньою міграцією та зниженням народжуваності. У 2011–2021 рр. зафіксовано істотне зменшення кількості жителів у всіх досліджуваних громадах, що супроводжується старінням населення та зростанням демографічного тиску. Господарська структура характеризується домінуванням первинного сектору, тоді як сфера послуг і туристична діяльність розвинені обмежено. Просторова концентрація поселень у долинних коридорах сприяла збереженню мовної та культурної ідентичності, однак гірський рельєф і недостатня транспортна доступність стримують економічну диверсифікацію. Дослідження також засвідчує наявність русинського компоненту та невеликих груп гуцулів, частково не відображених в офіційній статистиці.

Ключові слова: українська меншина, геодемографія, демографічний спад, зовнішня міграція, просторовий аналіз, територіальна структура, гірські поселення, Мармарощина.

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