

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND EVOLUTIVE ASSESSMENT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM VILLAGES IN THE NORTHERN REGION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RESULTS OF THE 2024 POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUS

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to assess the socio-economic and evolutionary status of small and medium-sized villages (SMV) in the Northern Development Region (NDR) of the Republic of Moldova. The objectives of the study are: a) systematization and general characterization of small and medium-sized villages in the study region; b) assessment of the dynamics of small and medium-sized villages between 1959-2024; c) identification of current problems and opportunities for the development of small and medium-sized villages in the NDR. The paper is based on consulting specialized literature, as well as processing statistical data on the dynamics of the population of human settlements in the NDR, based on population censuses conducted on the territory of the Republic of Moldova between 1959-2024.*

Key words: *population, small and medium-sized villages (SMV), census, North Development Region (NDR).*

JEL: J11, R23, R58

Introduction

The NDR is one of the five functional regions of the Republic of Moldova. It borders the Central Region (Ungheni, Telenești and Soldanești districts) to the south and Transnistria to the southeast (Camenca district). From an administrative-territorial point of view, the NDR includes three municipalities (Bălți, Edineț, Soroca) and 11 districts (Briceni, Edineț, Dondușeni, Drochia, Fălești, Florești, Glodeni, Ocnița, Râșcani, Sângerei, Soroca) (Figure 1) with a population of 627,911 inhabitants (2025), ranking, from this point of view, third among the five functional development regions of the country. The largest urban center of the region is the municipality of Bălți, the second city in the Republic of Moldova by the number of inhabitants. The North Development Region has an area of 10014 km² (equivalent to approximately 1,001,394 thousand ha), representing 29.6% of the total area of the country (14).

The NDR in general and its population in particular have been quite intensively researched in recent years (Hachi, M., Constantin, M., Lozovanu, D. 2021; Bulimaga, C., Bacal, P., Țugulea, A., Certan, C., 2023). The rural population of the Republic of Moldova has also been described in some studies (Mătcu, M., Hachi, M., 2008), but neither before nor after the population and housing census conducted in 2024 has any work been published with any analysis of the population of small and medium-sized villages (SMV) in the region.

The increasingly difficult geo-demographic and socio-economic situation of small and medium-sized villages in the Republic of Moldova, especially those located on the outskirts of administrative districts, represents a major problem for the central and local public administration (CPA and LPA), which requires major, but absolutely necessary, financial resources. The importance of a comprehensive study of this category of problematic localities also results from the frequent practice of allocating financial resources and approving the financing of regional and local projects in the established priority directions, without taking into account the geo-demographic situation and its

evolution in the near future, especially the increasingly intense migration of young people and the more accelerated demographic aging of small and medium-sized villages. These unfavorable demographic processes significantly reduce the capacity of the LPA to manage current community problems, such as the supply of quality drinking water, the proper disposal of waste and wastewater, resilience to climate change and risks, etc. In this context, analyses and forecasts of the demographic situation in particular and the socio-economic situation in general of the SMV are necessary, as well as proposals for economic activities that would remedy the created situation.

Regarding the classification of villages, in the context of the decrease in the rural population, we considered the following typology more appropriate: medium-sized villages - rural localities with a population between 501 and 1500 inhabitants; small villages - 201-500 inhabitants; very small villages - with less than 201 inhabitants.



Figure 1. NDR on the map of the Republic of Moldova

Source: <https://adrnord.md/taboneview.php?l=ro&idc=542&id=4613&t=/Regiunea-de-Dezvoltare-Nord/Regiunea-de-Dezvoltare-Nord/Harta/>

Basic content

The NDR was the promoter of the demographic transition in the Republic of Moldova. Starting with the decrease in the birth rate since the 1950s, the demographic transition was evident between 1959-1989 with the reduction of the population only in the rural localities of the northern region. In the following period, the negative dynamics is recorded in most localities of the state, including those in the DNR (8, pp.10-20).

Evolution of the number of small and medium-sized villages.

During the period 1959-2024, the number of small and medium-sized villages in the NDR recorded an oscillating evolution, against the background of a general positive trend. (Figure 2). Only in the years 1959-1970 is a general negative dynamic observed, caused by the increase in the population and the transition of some medium-sized villages to the category of large villages, as a result of the high natural increase. Thus, at the beginning of the reference period in the DNR there were 364 small and medium-sized villages, or 66% of the total rural localities of the region. The highest growth rate of the number of small and medium-sized villages in the DNR was recorded in the intercensal period 2014-2024 (from 423 to 489) – by 15%. This is taking place against the backdrop of the drastic decrease in the rural population in the republic and implicitly in the region in the last intercensal period, which caused many rural localities to move from the category of large villages to that of small and medium-sized ones.

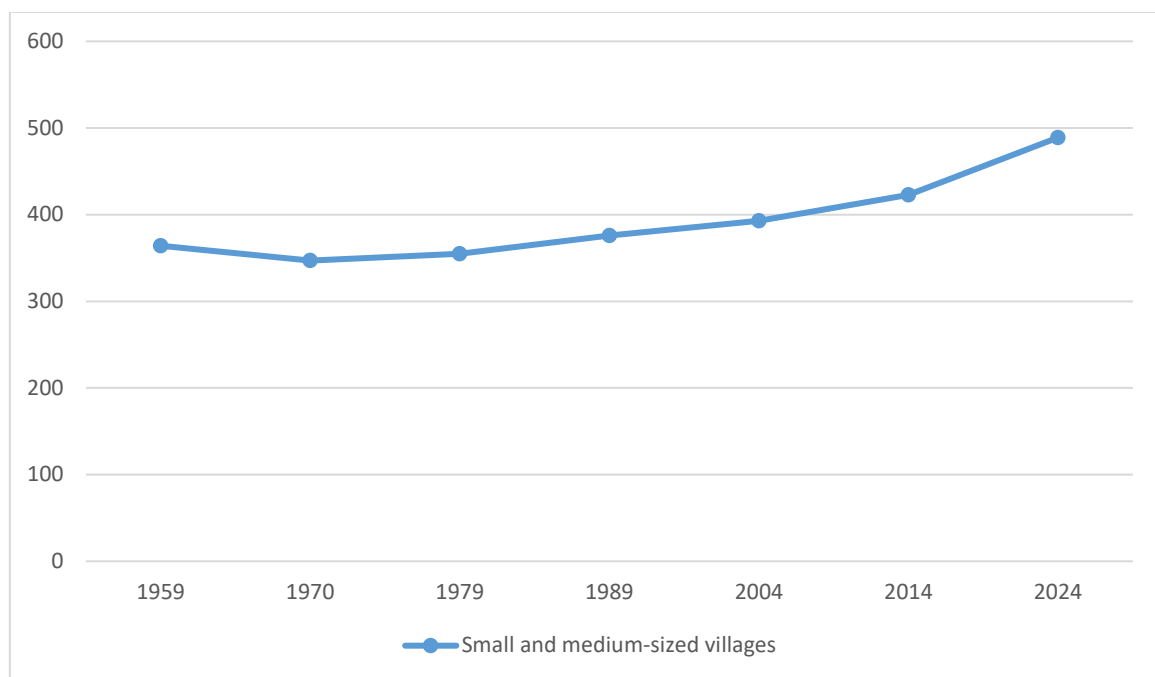


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of small and medium-sized villages in the NDR during the period 1959-2024

Source: The Population and Housing Census (1-3, 22-24).

According to the 2024 Population and Housing Census (RPL) data, out of 552 rural localities surveyed in the RDN, 488 or 88% are small and medium-sized villages, including 430 (78%) medium-sized villages, 31 (5.6%) small villages and 22 (4%) very small villages, and five villages were left without inhabitants (Figure 3).

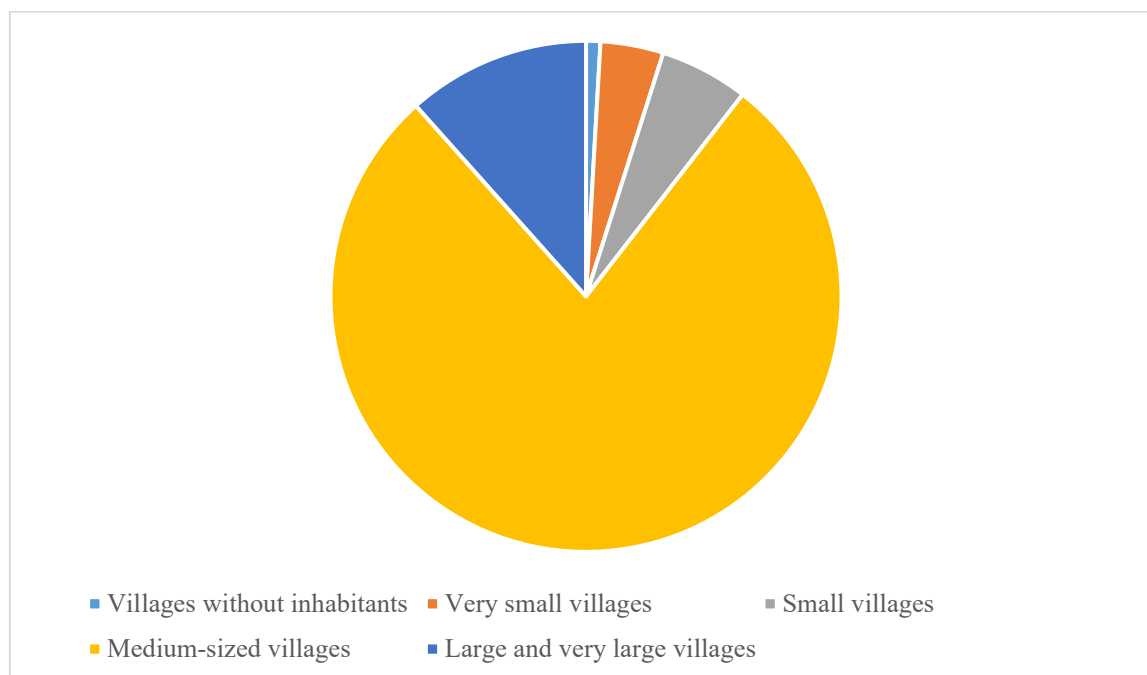


Figure 3. Types of villages in the NDR by population

Source: The 2024 Population and Housing Census (https://statistica.gov.md/ro/statistic_indicator_details/60)

Among the territorial-administrative units of the NDR, the most SMV are in Falesti district - 67, the highest percentage of SMV is in Falesti district - 94.3, and the lowest share of this type of villages is attested in Drochia district - 73.7%, so in all districts the share of SMMs among rural localities is overwhelming (Figure 4).

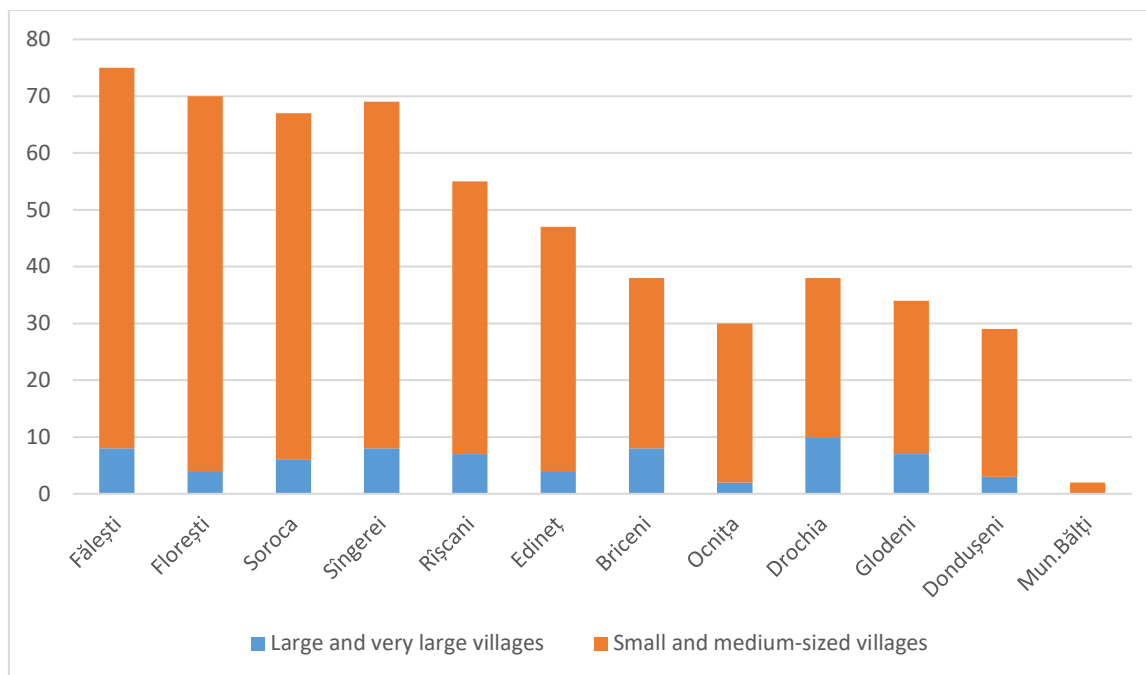


Figure 4. Share of SMV in the territorial-administrative units of the NDR

Source: The 2024 Population and Housing Census (https://statistica.gov.md/ro/statistic_indicator_details/60)

Evolution of the population of small and medium-sized villages

The dynamics of the population is a complex demographic process, which manifests itself under the synergistic influence of natural factors (climate, water resources, fertile soils, plant or animal food resources), socio-economic, ethnic-confessional, political or ecological, etc. The evolution of the rural population was determined by the synergistic action of natural and socio-economic factors, but also by the policies promoted in the analyzed period, marked by significant changes in reproductive and migratory behavior. The rural population of the NDR, after an increase that began in the 1950s of the last century, begins to decrease, unlike the total population of the region, already in the sub-period 1970-1979, a fact due to the intensification of urbanization in the 1970-1980s (Table 1).

Table 1. Evolution of the population of the NDR by categories, thousands of inhabitants

Population categories	Population Census Years						
	1959	1970	1979	1989	2004	2014	2024
Total population	882	1008	1055	1094	969	827	609
Total rural population	735	767	748	703	664	581	385
Population of small and medium-sized villages	250	238	239	245	253	262	247

Source: The Population and Housing Census (1-3, 22-24).

The maximum population growth of small and medium-sized villages in the NDR is attested in the intercensal sub-period 1959-1970, as a result of the high birth rate, but also of slower urbanization. The maximum increase in population during the period 1959-1970 is observed in the following small and medium-sized villages: Pavlovca (by 106%, from 60 to 124 inhabitants) in the Briceni district, Inundeni (by 76%, from 180 to 316 inhabitants) and Țepilova (by 59%, from 596 to 949 inhabitants) in the Soroca district, Valea Norocului (by 59%, from 308 to 490 inhabitants), Grinăuți (by 45%) in the Ocnița district, Gordinești Noi, a suburb of the city of Edineț (plus 41%, in the period 1959-1989 the latter experienced a population increase of 177%) and Chetroșica Veche under the jurisdiction of the city hall of Cupcini (+40%).

After 1970, growth rates decreased significantly, both due to the decrease in natural increase and the intensification of urbanization processes. During this period, many rural localities in the region declined (Table 2).

Table 2. SMV in the NDR with the largest decrease in the period 1959-1989 (%)

Locality	District	Number of inhabitants in 1959	Number of inhabitants in 1989	Difference between the number of population 1989 / 1959	Ratio between the number of population 1989 / 1959
Armanca	Rîșcani	30	0	30	0%
Cuconestii Vechi	Edinet	1157	6	1151	1%
Chetrișul Nou	Donduseni	90	2	88	2%
Vantina Mica	Soroca	839	16	823	2%
Vrănești	Donduseni	502	27	475	6%
Elenovca	Donduseni	216	22	196	10%
Gavrilovca	Singerei	164	20	144	12%
Serghieni	Glodeni	150	22	128	15%
Teleseuca Noua	Donduseni	577	96	481	17%
Iachimeni	Edinet	189	36	153	19%
Ivanovca	Falesti	134	32	102	24%
Chirilovca	Briceni	62	18	44	29%

Cot	Glodeni	155	58	97	37%
Caraiman	Donduseni	241	93	148	39%
Bocicauti	Briceni	116	46	70	40%

Source: The Population and Housing Census 1959, 1970, 1979, 1989 (22-24).

The disappearance of many very small settlements during the Soviet period is due to the state policy of the time of centralized support of large settlements, and the small ones were the last to be electrified. The decline of the village of Cuconestii Vechi began with the construction of the Costești–Stânca hydroelectric power plant, when a large part of the village was covered by the waters of the reservoir during the years 1975-78, and the locals were relocated to Cuconestii Noi.

In 1989, against the background of the frontal decrease in the population number throughout the Republic of Moldova, both in rural and urban areas, due to the start of post-Soviet emigration and the sharp decrease in the birth rate.

Thus, in the period 1989-2004, the population practically disappeared in the village of Dărcăuții Noi (Soroca district), when out of 22 inhabitants at the beginning of the period, only one remained, and in the 2014 census no more inhabitants were recorded.

In the intercensal period 2014-2024, the largest decrease in the population was recorded in the villages of Florești district. The village of Caraiman in Donduseni district was left without inhabitants during this period (Table 3).

Table 3. SMV in the NDR with the greatest decrease in the period 2014-2024

Locality	District	Population in 2014	Population in 2024	Difference in the number of inhabitants	Percentage of population decrease
Caraiman	Donduseni	14	0	14	100
Nicolaevca	Florești	221	15	206	93
Evghenievca	Sîngerei	224	29	195	87
Antonovca	Florești	53	11	42	79
Alexăndrești	Rîșcani	188	41	147	78
Antonovca	Sîngerei	108	27	81	75
Frumușica	Florești	1556	731	825	53

Source: The Population and Housing Census (23-24).

At the same time, in the NDR there are also rural localities that have registered an increase in the population during the reference period. Thus, in the commune of Copăcenii in the district of Sîngerei, where, alongside the villages of Evghenievca and Antonovca where a massive population decrease was recorded (Table 3), there is the village of Petrovca, where the population increased by 11% during the period 2014-2024, increasing from 321 to 356 inhabitants. This village has a central position among the rural localities in the commune. The specifics of the population of this rural locality, in addition to the fact that its number increased during the reference period, are the majority Ukrainian ethnicity and a very organized Baptist community. Another locality in the DNR where the population increased (by 66%) during this period is the village of Țapoc, Natalievca commune, Fălești district – from 127 to 211. Here too, the majority of the inhabitants are of Ukrainian ethnicity.

The largest increase in the population during this intercensal period is attested in the village of Cucuieții Vechi, Alexăndrești commune, Rîșcani district. Here the population increased from 147 to 239, i.e. by 79%. This locality is home to the only school (gymnasium) and church in Alexăndrești commune. At the same time, also in this commune, the residence village experienced a decrease in the population of 78% (Table 3).

Thus, against the backdrop of the total decrease in the population in the DNR from 1989-2024, the number of people living in the SMV does not undergo essential changes but even experiences a slight increase (Figure 5) due to the fact that many villages in the area have moved into the SMV category.

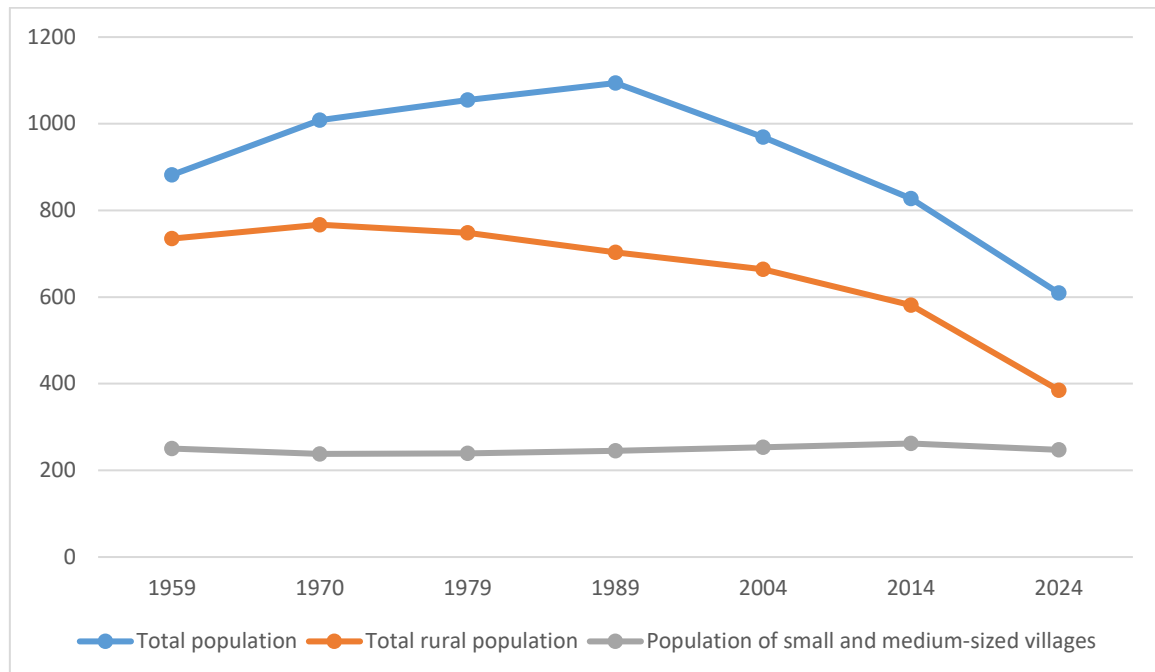


Figure 5. Evolution of the population in the NDR during the period 1959-2024

Source: The Population and Housing Census (1-3, 22-24).

Evaluative assessment of small and medium-sized villages

In the context of the mechanization of contemporary agriculture and various opportunities for emigration to more economically developed states than the Republic of Moldova, an insufficiently developed branch of the economy in the SMV of the NDR is the sphere of services in general and the HoReCa⁶ sector in particular. Due to the decreasing population density in the NDR, HoReCa enterprises in the area have to address services mainly to tourists from outside the region and the country. But in this part of the country in the SMV there is only one hotel and two restaurants (in Pocrovca, Dondușeni district and Albinețul Vechi in Făleşti district). Things are better with regard to the guesthouses in the SMV. In this HoReCa chapter, there are guesthouses in the villages of Chișcăreni (Sângerei), Cobani (Glodeni), Naslavcea (Ocnîța), Egoreni (Soroca), Hlinaia Mică (Edineț), Lunga (Florești), Văratice, Duruitoarea Veche and Duruitoarea Nouă (Râșcani), Bocșa, (Făleşti), Japca (Florești) and Maramonovca (Drochia). However, all the guesthouses mentioned above do not offer food services (15-17). Emphasizing the need to develop the HoReCa sector in the SMV of the DNR, a SWOT analysis of their socio-economic development is proposed (Table 5).

⁶ HoReCa (or HORECA) is an abbreviation for Hotel, Restaurant, and Café/Catering, representing the food service and hospitality industry sector. It encompasses businesses that prepare, serve, or provide food, beverages, and accommodation.

Table 5. *SWOT analysis of small and medium-sized villages in the Northern Development Region*

Strengths • Pro-natalist state policies • State programs to attract young people and stimulate return migration; • SMSV presents quiet areas with high environmental comfort, being located in a picturesque natural setting; • Connection to road networks, electricity and electronic communications • Local occupations, crafts and customs, with a high tourist potential; • The presence of active LAGs; • Proximity to state border crossing points, which stimulates cross-border cooperation.	Weaknesses • Excessive fragmentation of the SDR; • Unfavorable geo-demographic situation with pronounced worsening trends; • Low level of socio-economic development; • Low employment opportunities for local people; • Insufficient local and regional financial resources; • Poor condition of roads and difficult access to many villages in the region; • Medical, educational, social infrastructure and services are insufficient.
Opportunities • Cross-border cooperation within euroregions; • Implementation of large regional projects to expand and modernize the physical infrastructure; • Promotion of traditional occupations, crafts and products for the purpose of tourism valorization; • Consistent programs for the valorization of renewable energy sources; • Tourist and educational valorization of the cultural heritage of localities with ethnic minority; • Regionalization and decentralization of public services; • Active involvement of Native Associations, LAGs.	Threats • The tense situation in connection with the military siege of the Russia on the neighboring region of Ukraine; • The danger of further decrease in the population of small and medium-sized villages; • The reduced capacity for co-financing of local budgets; • Reducing the demand for rural labor and unattractive wages for activities performed in rural areas; • Intensification of climate changes and low resilience to their effects; • Unresolved interethnic problems; • The tense geopolitical situation in the region; • Major investment risks; • Delay in the administrative-territorial reform and its insufficiently substantiated implementation;

Source: prepared by author

In the current conditions of the development of agricultural technology and transport, the permanent proximity of a large workforce to agricultural land is no longer relevant. On the other hand, living in small communities is a natural and beneficial form of social organization for the human species. Thus, an analysis of the prospects for the continuity of small villages in the context of sustainable development is required.

Economic activities that could increase the employment rate and income of the population of small and medium-sized villages in the NDR of the Republic of Moldova include the development of rural tourism, ecotourism, gastronomic tourism, as well as the exploitation of renewable energy sources (solar and wind). Inter-community cooperation, following the example of successful Local Action Groups (LAGs), the development of cross-border projects and the attraction of the diaspora and native associations, is also very important.

Conclusions

- Between 2014-2024, the most accelerated population reduction since the Stalinist period of the Republic of Moldova is recorded, which is due, in particular, to the massive external migration of the young population, the significant decrease in natural growth and the acceleration of the process of intense demographic aging.
- However, despite the unfavorable geodemographic and geopolitical situation, there are development opportunities based on the sustainable and efficient use of local resources, but also on attracting investments and remittances, aimed at stimulating demographic growth and the socio-economic recovery of small and medium-sized villages and the NDR as a whole.

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