

POLICY RESPONSES TO LOW FERTILITY IN SERBIA. THE CASE OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF BELA PALANKA

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Abstract

This article deals with the issue of low fertility in Serbia. In the case of the municipality of Bela Palanka, the authors made an attempt to establish the actual causes of this phenomenon and to examine the attitudes of the female population considering their decision against parturition, i.e. giving birth to more children. Based on the research results, some measures of population policy are proposed which can be implemented at the local level. The same measures can be applied in the case of any other municipality in Serbia with a similar demographic situation.

Keywords: fertility, population policy, Serbia, Bela Palanka.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, as almost any other European country, Serbia is facing the consequences of continuous, decade-wide negative demographic trends. According to the official data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS), in 2014, the population growth rate stood at -4.9%. The negative natural increase was caused by the decline in the fertility of the population below the simple reproductive norm. In 2013, in Serbia, the level of fertility was 31% lower than required for generation replacement (SORS, 2014). Given the fact that spontaneous changes in reproductive behavior are unlikely, the implementation of a population policy in Serbia is a necessity (Rašević and Petrović, 1995, p. 37). The analysis of the causes of low childbirths indicates that the negative trends in parturition are significantly affected by the postponement of the first birth or even abandonment of births. According to the data from 2011, one in four women aged 30-39 did not give birth. In 2002, it was one in six and two decades ago only every ninth woman did not give birth (Marinković, 2011, p. 3).

From the above mentioned aspects arise the following questions: Is there a real place for population policy in the new model of reproductive behavior? and What is the number of children that Serbia needs for making the next generation comparable to the present one? Previous analyses indicated that the main reason for low fertility is a lack of interest for having the third child, and that the fertile period of women should be longer than ten years, and that 105,000 babies per year should be born (Đurđev 2004, p. 29). The experience of other countries has shown that restrictive measures considering pro-birth policy do not give the desired results, or that they only have short-term demographic effects. According to Vasić and Marinković, family policy measures should encourage the birth of the second and each subsequent child, and in accordance to the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO), they should not support the birth in the case of mothers under the age of 18 and those over 34 years of age (Vasić and Marinković, 2016, p. 165).

Demographic problems such as low fertility, depopulation and the population aging are typical for the low fertility regions of the Republic of Serbia, i.e. the territory of Central Serbia (except for the municipalities of Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Prijepolje, Preševo and Bujanovac) and Vojvodina. Although the decline in the total fertility rate started in the mid-20th century, due to the effects of demographic inertia, as well as migration caused by civil wars, the consequences were not so pronounced at the macro level. At the level of smaller areas, such as municipalities, depopulation and the aging of population, which have lasted for more than five decades, have caused shortages and the aging of the workforce and a general regression of social life. Therefore, these disorders represent a realistic demographic development problem for many municipalities.

The municipality of Bela Palanka is a case study of this general phenomenon. According to the official data of the National Agency for Regional Development (NARD), in addition to 18 other municipalities in Serbia, in 2014 Bela Palanka belonged to the category of devastated areas, with the development level 50% below the

national average. In the period from 1948 to 2011, the population of the municipality was reduced by more than half (SORS, 2014). In 2011, the age index stood at 1.86, which indicates that the population of the municipality of Bela Palanka is located in the deepest stage of demographic age (Radivojević *et al.*, 2016, p. 171). Such indicators lead to the necessity of implementing a population policy, which, among other things, should stimulate the birth rate. Based on selected socio-demographic problems, the aim of the article is to make an attempt at giving a proposal towards providing basic directions for the development and implementation of natality population policy measures at the level of local governments, in this case of the municipality of Bela Palanka.

2. Legislative activities in Serbia within the population and family planning policy

Since the earliest days of human history, society has been interested in family planning in a direction consistent with the circumstances and conditions in which people lived. Recently, the impact of society in this area has been on the operation of various programs and movements. Thus, family planning occurs on three levels such as an individual practice, a movement of social groups and a program adopted and implemented by the state (Rašević, 1999, p. 127).

Political action in the field of population has intensively appeared in the 20th century, with the advent of mortality policy first, the policy of improving health later, migratory policies and, in the 1970s, with a population policy in the field of fertility. The systematic study of the population policy at the international level began after the World Population Plan of Action was adopted at the World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974 (UN, 2013).

In its demographic development, Serbia, when it comes to population policy, passed through several stages following other European countries. However, due to significant differences in the economic development, this remained mainly at the level which meant less tangible benefits, a smaller corpus rate and lower coverage measures (Gavrilović and Jugović, 2006, p. 98).

In Serbia, the measures relating to family planning occur at different levels, ranging from the state to the level of local government. The National Parliament of the Republic of Serbia (NPRS), at the proposal of the Government and certain ministries, adopts legal regulations for the support of family and birth. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, in Article 66, advocates for the protection of the family, mother, single parent and child. Article 63, Paragraph 2, sets the aim to support the decision to have children and to stimulate parenting.

The 'Family Law' issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) in 2005, thoroughly explores the concepts of family, motherhood, fatherhood, marriage, the decision to have children and other aspects in this realm. The 'Law on Financial Support to Families' includes improving conditions for meeting the basic needs of children, special procreation incentives and financial support to vulnerable families

with children. Article 9, Paragraph 4 of this Law allows local governments to determine additional rights if they have allocated budgetary funds for supporting families (MLSP, 2002). 'Labor Law' deals with the protection of maternity (Article 85), as well as with guarantees for maternity leave and child care. According to the amendments to this law, enacted in 2013, based on Article 93, the employers are obliged to provide 90 minutes per day for breastfeeding to employed mothers who return from maternity leave earlier (MLSP, 2005).

In 2005, the Parliament of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (PAPV) adopted the 'Program of Demographic Development of AP Vojvodina and Its Implementation Measures'. In 2008, MLSP has adopted a document entitled 'Strategy of Encouraging Procreation'. In this strategy, the general objective of sustainable demographic development of the Republic of Serbia is a stationary population, i.e. a population in which the next generation will be the same size as the existing one. The strategy openly pronounced pro-birth measures. Instead of the implicit definition, the explicit definition of population policy has been accepted, because studies have shown that most women in Serbia do not see its role in solving the problem of low birth rate (Rašević, 1995). In this regard, much is expected from society, which is probably conditioned by the value system developed during socialism. The implementation of this strategy is not yet fully in effect. Today in Serbia only two measures of population policy are enacted. These are parental allowance and full wage compensation to employed mothers during maternity leave, for a period of one year after the birth of the first and second child, and for a period of two years after the birth of the third and each subsequent child.

The 'Constitution of the Republic of Serbia' (NPRS, 2006), the 'Local Government Act' (NPRS, 2007), as special laws, give local governments significant competence and powers, whose effective implementation can satisfy the needs of the citizens. The municipal assembly, or town, as the highest authority in local government, is most competent to deal with the problems of population and development, and is more resourceful to establish and to implement population policy measures in the municipality or city, based on the analysis of the situation in all its important aspects, in particular through the work of the specially formed body. The establishment of population policy at the local community is of paramount importance for giving a political response to demographic challenges. No population policy implemented at the state level can take into account all the peculiarities of life in a particular local environment. In this way, the rate of higher state structures could be supplemented and the needs and expectations of the local population would be more likely met.

3. Fertility changes in Serbia

For the definition and implementation of population policy measures that address the problem of low birth, the necessary data on the characteristics of fertile female population are needed. Given the importance of these data, the SORS included an issue on the number of live births in the content of all Censuses in the period 1948-2011.

These data are important for understanding the final effective fertility (if women are older than 50 years), the current effective fertility (in the case of women who are in the fertile period), as well as the volume of non-participating women in reproduction. Census data from 1948 to 1981, relate to the whole territory of the Republic of Serbia, while censuses of 1991, 2002 and 2011 do not include data for the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija (SORS, 2013).

Table 1: Number of women and live births

	1948	1953	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011
Total	2,382,132	2,591,779	2,791,178	3,257,729	3,599,248	3,237,467	3,279,564	3,189,716
no ch.	826,343	752,469	716,938	866,823	908,122	722,119	815,804	819,822
Live births								
1	284,551	374,825	466,028	601,054	681,972	662,970	651,009	629,117
2	312,380	418,792	565,574	781,943	1,093,394	1,283,758	1,377,863	1,361,775
3	249,472	297,544	343,454	367,657	376,233	311,034	296,574	283,259
4	193,601	214,912	222,263	212,761	189,085	111,814	79,263	62,397
*5+	515,661	527,892	472,606	421,335	350,442	122,258	57,472	33,346
Un.	124	5,345	4,315	6,156	-	23,514	1,579	-

*Five or more live births; no ch. – no children; Un. – unknown

Source: SORS, 2013

Census data from 1949 to 2011 (Table 1) indicate that in the given period the share of women who did not give birth did not significantly increase, and that this share in 2011 with 25.7% was at the level of 1961. The lowest percentage of women who did not give birth was in 1991, with 22.31%. The most obvious change in the fertility of the female population in Serbia in the given period is the continuous increase in the share of women who gave birth to one or two children and a reduction in the number of women who gave birth to three children from 1961, four from 1953 and five or more from 1948. One can find that in the period 1948-1981, the number of female population of childbearing age in Serbia increased by 51.09%, in the period from 1981 to 2011, decreased by 11.37%, which represents the decrease of 409,532 women in fertile period. This trend of reducing the number of fertile women after 1981 is primarily the result of unexecuted censuses in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija. For the purposes of monitoring fertility characteristics of the female population at the level of the whole Republic of Serbia, in the period 1948-2011, we would have to take into account the different reproductive model of Albanian, as well as Serbian population from Kosovo and Metohija.

Changes in fertility trends of the female population in Serbia in the period 1952-2003 may be determined by studying the fertility tables of the SORS, for the territory of the Republic of Serbia, Central Serbia and Vojvodina. Data on values of specific fertility rates for the period 1953-2002, show the following changes: (1) the fertility of young women (under 25 years of age) was reduced on average by half, with women aged 25-36 years, ranging from -22% to -43%, while with women older than 36 years,

negative growth commensurate with age, ranging from -55% to -96%; (2) the most intense decline in the specific fertility of women aged 20 and over, which occurred during the periods 1953-1961 and 1961-1971, is the most important in determining the overall decline in fertility and early depopulation tendencies in the Republic of Serbia; (3) the contemporary unfavorable trends of specific fertility rate of women up to 26 years of age, which are recorded for the period 1991-2002, in favor of older women, reflect a depopulation trend and indicate the viability of the post-transitional model of fertility and reproduction; (4) the transition from traditional to modern reproduction models, started in the late '70s of the 20th century (SORS, 2007).

Table 2: The net reproduction rate in the Republic of Serbia for the period 1950-2013

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2011	2012	2013
R.Srbija	1.49	1.02	0.97	1.03	0.97	0.70	0.68	0.67	0.70	0.69
C.Srbija	1.44	0.87	0.82	0.86	0.82	0.72	0.68	-	-	-
AP Voj.	1.31	0.91	0.75	0.86	0.80	0.66	0.67	-	-	-
AP KIM	2.28	2.07	2.02	2.04	1.59	-	-	-	-	-
NUTS 2 Regions										
Vojvodina	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.65	0.69	0.69
Beogradski	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.69	0.72	0.70
Š.i Z.Srbija	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.67	0.70	0.68
J.i I.Srbija	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.66	0.66	0.67
KIM	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

- no data available: R.Srbija – Republic of Serbia; C.Srbija – Central Serbia; AP Voj. – Autonomous Province of Vojvodina; AP KIM – Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija; Vojvodina – Region of Vojvodina; Beogradski – Region of Belgrade; Š.i Z.Srbija – Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia; J.i I.Srbija – Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia; KIM – Region of Kosovo and Metohija.

Source: SORS, 2014

One of the most commonly used indicators of birth is the net reproduction rate. This indicator represents the number of live female children that would be born by a woman during the procreative period, if fertility and mortality according to age from the observed year were unchanged throughout the procreative period. For the simple generation replacement it is necessary for its value to be equal to one. In Serbia, the net reproduction rate has been over the last unit value in 1980, and in Central Serbia and Vojvodina in 1950. In 2013, this rate was 31% below the levels needed for the renewal of generations, in the Republic of Serbia and the Region of Vojvodina (SORS, 2014). The level of 31% below the needs of simple renewal of generations means that the next generation of women will be one-third smaller compared to the present one. The total fertility rate is the most common indicator of the fertility level of the female population. It represents the total number of live births per woman, in terms of fertility by age in the observed year, ignoring mortality until the end of the fertile period. To ensure simple reproduction, fertility rates should be at a level of 2.1 children per woman. In Serbia, the fertility rate per woman in 2013 was 1.429. Since 2000, this indicator of the level of fertility in Serbia has had approximately the same value. In 1990,

the total fertility rate was above the level of simple reproduction when it amounted to 2.101 (SORS, 2014).

The present data indicate that in Serbia the problem of low fertility is very critical, and that the existing family policy measures are not enough. The only solution to mitigate this problem is the introduction of stronger and more radical measures of family policy in the upcoming years. If such measures are implemented immediately, followed by other measures in the field of economic and social reform, unfavorable demographic trends could slow down. According to the forecasts by Goran Penev, in this case, the conditions for demographic recovery of Serbia might be expected, eventually, in the middle of the 21st century (Penev, 2013).

4. The current fertility level in the municipality of Bela Palanka

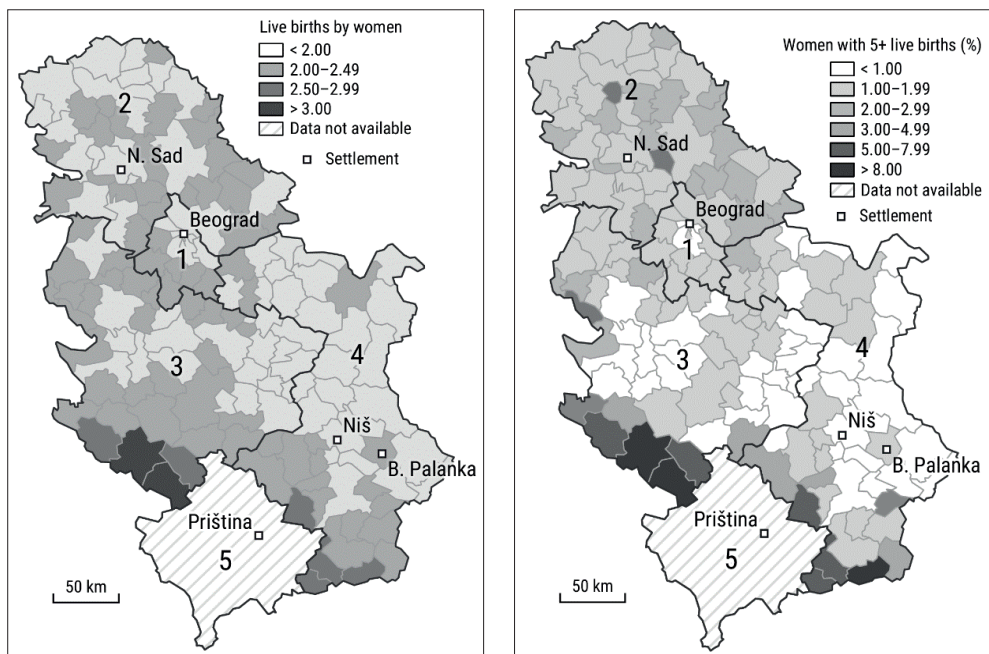
Based on official statistics, the fertility rate in Serbia at the municipal level can be traced through the average number of live births per woman. This indicator does not take into account women who have not given birth, so that it has a higher value than the total fertility rate. According to the census data from 2011, the average number of children born per woman at the level of the whole Republic of Serbia was 1.96. This value is the highest in the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia (2.05) and the lowest (1.95) in Southern and Eastern Serbia (SORS, 2013). The municipality of Bela Palanka is located within the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia, which has the lowest average number of children per woman (Figure 1a).

In the municipality of Bela Palanka, the average number of live births per woman in 2011 was 2.00, which is above average for the region it belongs to, but below the level needed for the renewal of generations. Out of the total number of women aged 15 and over, 19.1% of them did not give birth. The population of women in childbearing age (15 to 49 years of age), is made of 2,230 women, which amounts to 43.3% of the total number. The total number of women, who belong to the youngest ten-year age group (15 to 24 years), is 32.3% lower than the number of women in the age group of 50 to 59 years (Table 3). It is obvious that the decline in fertility is the result of reduction of the fertile women contingent.

Table 3: Female population of the municipality of Bela Palanka per number of live births in 2011

Age groups	Total	Childless	Female population per number of live births					The average number of live births per woman
			1	2	3	4	5+	
15-19	289	267	19	3	-	-	-	1.14
20-24	327	250	44	26	6	1	-	1.53
25-29	326	136	78	86	16	7	3	1.80
30-39	561	75	104	288	54	29	11	2.11
40-49	727	50	126	455	66	19	11	2.02
50-59	910	65	142	621	56	16	10	1.98
60+	2,010	142	396	1,166	205	77	24	2.03
Total	5,150	985	909	2,645	403	149	59	2.00

Source: SORS, 2012



1 – Region of Belgrade; 2 – Region of Vojvodina; 3 – Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia; 4 – Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia; and 5 – Region of Kosovo and Metohija

Figure 1: (a) The average number of live births per woman; (b) Women with five or more live births (%)

The explanation for the higher level of fertility in the municipality of Bela Palanka, in comparison to the average for the republic and the region which it belongs to is the fact that this municipality has 11.69% of the Romani in the total population (SORS, 2012). Roma families are very numerous, and women from this ethnic group often give birth to more than five children (Figure 1b). Delay in the fertility transition among the Roma population is caused by a number of socio-economic and cultural factors, which due to social isolation, have slowed down the demographic changes in the Roma population. Female population in the Roma community still has limited options for choice of living conditions and a small degree of autonomy. Women’s dependence on men, imposing the parenting role of women as the only option, and limited mobility are important elements of the status of women in the Roma family, which contribute to the high fertility of the population (Radovanović and Knežević, 2014, p. 38). The birth of a large number of children in Roma families raises the level of fertility and improves the demographic statistics of Bela Palanka. However, this reproductive model of Roma families produces a range of other issues, such as adolescent motherhood, unemployment, poverty, unsanitary housing conditions and many others.

5. Research methods

For the purpose of defining the natality measures of population policy in the Bela Palanka municipality, a survey was conducted in order to find out the opinion of the

population about the types of measures that would be most effective for raising the fertility level. The aim of the research is a better examination of the specific situation in the municipality in order to understand the needs of the local population that should be involved in the decision-making process.

The research was carried out in February 2016, in the urban settlement of Bela Palanka (Nursery 'Izvorčić', 'Health Center', 'Municipal Government') and rural settlements: Dolac and Crvena Reka. The first part of the questionnaire was designed to collect basic demographic information about the respondents. The second part (questions 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14) referred to the current situation in terms of the number of children that respondents have, while the third part (questions 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19) referred to the factors that could contribute to raising the fertility (incentives and limitations). The fourth part (20, 21, 22) referred to the views of the respondents on the situation of the family and parenthood in the life value system.

The total number of correctly completed questionnaires was 160, out of the planned 210. A sample of 160 respondents represents 7.2% of the total fertile female population in the Bela Palanka municipality. Based on this sample, attitudes of the entire fertile population can be assessed, with the probability of 0.99 and confidence interval $0.071 \leq \pi \leq 0.073$.

The research results were processed with the help of statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics 19.00. For the data analysis, the operation of descriptive statistics and statistical conclusions were used. By means of procedures and methods of descriptive statistics, based on the data obtained from the questionnaires, a description of the respondent groups was carried out as well as their attitudes. For a comparative analysis of key issues, cross-tabulations were used. Within inference statistics procedure, Pearson's Chi-square test and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient were used.

Differences in respondents' attitudes to the question on the ideal number of children were tested in two cases. In the first case, the test groups were: (1) women who live in the city; and (2) women living in the countryside. In the second case were: (1) women who are younger than 30 years; and (2) women who are older than 30 years.

The proposed hypotheses are: *H1*. There are no statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents regarding the ideal number of children in relation to the place of residence (rural-urban); and *H2*. There are no statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents about the ideal number of children, when it comes to women younger or older than 30 years. Testing statistically significant correlation between: (1) the actual number of children; (2) satisfaction with their own lives; and (3) the level of education, was carried out by testing the following hypothesis: *H3*. There is no statistically significant correlation between the actual number of children and the satisfaction of their own lives; *H4*. There is no significant relationship between the actual number of children and level of education; and *H5*. There is no statistically significant relationship between the education of respondents and the satisfaction of their own lives.

6. Results

The questionnaire on the causes of low live births was applied to the population of women over fifteen years. The demographic profile of the sample is shown in Table 4. In a sample of 160 women, 83.1% have children, while 16.9% do not. The average number of children per woman in the sample is 1.93, and the average age at the birth of the first child is 23 years (Table 5). Most respondents had two children (45%), and one child (26.9%), while 60.6% considered that the ideal number of children is 'two'. There is a significant proportion of those who believe that the ideal number of children is 'three' (31.9%).

Table 4: Demographic profile of the respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Age	15-19	10	6.3
	20-24	23	14.4
	25-29	41	25.6
	30-39	43	26.9
	40-49	30	18.8
	50+	13	8.1
Occupation	Student	6	3.8
	Employed	67	41.9
	Unemployed	83	51.9
	Retired	4	2.5
Education	Primary school	32	20.0
	Secondary school	64	40.0
	Bachelor	42	26.3
	Master	22	13.8
	PhD	0	0
Ethnicity	Serbian	118	73.7
	Roma	42	26.3
	Other	0	0
Place of residence	City	112	70.0
	Village	48	30.0
Number of household members	One	4	2.5
	Two	7	4.4
	Three	34	21.3
	Four	81	50.6
	Five or more	34	21.3
Type of household	One-person	5	3.1
	Simple*	82	51.3
	Extended**	73	45.6
Total		160	100

*married couple with children or without children;

** married couple with children/without children and parents/other relatives

Source: Authors' calculations with SPSS 19.00

By means of comparative data review on the number of children and the respondents' attitudes towards the ideal number of children (Table 6), the results show that the participation of women with one or two children who consider that the ideal number of children is 'three', make 30.1%. An interesting fact is that among the respondents who have four or more children, the prevailing opinion is that the ideal number of children is 'two'. These are the women of Roma ethnicity.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation
How many children do you have?	133	1	5	1.93	0.939
How old were you when you gave birth to the first child?	133	14	37	23.00	4.778

Source: Authors' calculations with SPSS 19.00

An insight into the group of women who do not plan to have more children, was achieved by using cross-tabulations of variables: (1) Age, (2) Do you plan to be pregnant again with more children?, and (3) How many children do you have?, (4) Do you plan to be pregnant again with more kids? Most women who do not plan to give birth to more than the actual number of children belong to the age group of 30 to 49 years (32.7%). In the age group of 30 to 39 years dominate women who do not plan to have children (55.1%), while in the age group of 20 to 29 years, 59.4% of women plan to give birth to more children.

If we compare the number of children per woman, and the plans for future births, according to the attitudes of respondents from the sample, the following can be determined: (1) women who have three or more children, generally do not plan to have more children; (2) the percentage of women with two children who no longer plan to give birth is 86.1%; and (3) the share of women with one child who do not plan to bear more children is 48.8%.

Table 6: Achieved and ideal number of children

		What is your opinion about the ideal number of children?				Total
		2	3	4	*5+	
How many children do you have?	none	20	6	0	0	26
	one	29	11	3	0	43
	two	40	27	4	1	72
	three	2	5	2	0	9
	four	2	1	2	0	5
	five or more	4	1	0	0	5
Total		97	51	11	1	160

*Five or more children

Source: Authors' calculations with SPSS 19.00

Question 18 from the survey ('In your opinion how the mentioned reasons influence the decision on not giving birth to more children?') tries to establish the main

reasons for not giving birth to more children. The intensity of the impact of the above reason was evaluated using the scale from 1 to 3 (1 – ‘strongly influences’, 2 – ‘has little effect’ and 3 – ‘has no effect’). As the most important reasons for the decision on non-parturition, the respondents rate unemployment, low wages, high costs of raising children and an uncertain future of the family. The desire for a comfortable life, professional constraints and birth of the desired number of children are the reasons that were rated as less important. Question 19 (‘In your opinion how much would population policy measures encourage the birth of more children?’) tries to provide answers about which policy measures could have the most stimulating effect on the increase in the level of fertility. Women respondents evaluated the intensity of the importance of the following measures on a scale from 1 to 3 (1 – ‘very stimulating’, 2 – ‘a little stimulating’ and 3 – ‘not stimulating’). The women respondents from the sample marked material measures as the most stimulating: (1) financial compensation for the parents, who are unemployed, (2) compensation for the third child (3) decrease of the cost of education, etc. An interesting fact is that the following dimensions are estimated as less significant: (1) expansion of the network of institutions for children and (2) part-time jobs. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the fact that, in our sample, 51.9% of women are unemployed, and 45.6% live in extended households, which means that they can count on the help of parents or other relatives in bringing up children (Table 4).

The views of female respondents about the following statements: (1) motherhood is the most important factor for self-creation and self-esteem; and (2) for most women, family life and children are the most important value in life to strive for, measured by using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Most of the female respondents in terms of the attitudes declared that they fully (5), or mostly agree with the above statements (4).

The results of Chi-square tests of the differences in the prevalence of respondents attitudes to the ideal number of children, showed the following: (H1) there are no statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents regarding the ideal number of children depending on the place of residence (rural/ urban) ($\chi^2 = 1.610$; $df = 3$; $p > .05$, two-tailed); and (H2) attitudes of women who have less, or more than 30 years, differ substantially when it comes to the question of the ideal number of children ($\chi^2 = 8.139$; $df = 3$; $p < .05$, two-tailed). Women who are in the second half of the fertile period (over 30 years), have a common opinion that the ideal number of children is ‘three’ or ‘four’, while women younger than 30 years, have the prevailing opinion that the ideal number of children is ‘two’.

To test the existence of the correlations between: (1) the actual number of children, (2) the level of education; and (3) satisfaction with their own lives, Spearman’s coefficient of rank correlation was used. Earlier literature and folk beliefs emphasized the positive link between the actual number of children and the satisfaction of their own lives. However, the results of correlation analysis on our sample show that: (H3) there is no statistically significant correlation between the actual number of children

and the satisfaction of one's own life ($g = .063$, $p > .05$, two-tailed). Also, ($H4$) there is no correlation between the actual number of children and the level of education ($g = -.316$, $p > .05$, two-tailed). Between the education level and the level of satisfaction in their own life, in the studied sample ($H5$) there was a statistically significant correlation of medium intensity ($g = .434$; $p < .05$, two-tailed), and thus there is a stronger evidence of pleasure when education is higher.

7. Discussions

Local government of Bela Palanka has no established program of population policy. From the results obtained in the previous sections, it can be determined that the need for a comprehensive program of population policy in this municipality is very high. Regarding pro-natality measures, currently only the measure of one-off financial benefits for each child born in the municipality, in the amount of 30,000 dinars, is implemented. The results of the research indicate that the female population is of the opinion that additional natality policy measures could have a stimulating effect on the birth of more children.

Modeled after the 'Program of Demographic Development of AP Vojvodina with measures for its implementation' (PAPV, 2005), with respect to the opinion of the local population, as well as specificity in its reproductive behavior, certain guidelines for defining additional natality population policy measures in the municipality of Bela Palanka will be proposed.

The proposed strategic measures of a natality policy are as follows: (1) identifying resources for population policy of local government; (2) determining the amount of funds in the municipal budget to be collected for the local population policy; (3) identifying and activating other sources of income for the local population policy and creating the organizational conditions for their collection (the establishment of the fund, etc.); (4) defining the extent of the local population policy; and (5) determining the institutional framework for their implementation.

Within specific measures the following financial measures are proposed: (1) a maternity package for each newly-born baby; (2) supplementary allowance to single-parent family; (3) compensation for families in which both parents are unemployed; (4) allowance for special care; (5) provision of school supplies and books; (6) special allowance for the third child; (7) support for the treatment of infertility; and (8) exemption from payment of utility services for families with three children. In accordance with the recommendation of the WHO, and with the aim of reducing adolescent fertility in this municipality, the proposed measures should be limited to the cases when the age of the mother at the first born child is above eighteen. Aside from the mentioned measures, intangible dimensions are proposed as well: (1) dissemination of knowledge on the demographic situation in the country; (2) increased transparency on the benefits that individuals are entitled to have; and (3) the simplification of the bureaucratic process for those who are entitled to receive compensation.

Aside from pro-natality measures, in the Bela Palanka municipality, there is a need to introduce certain anti-natality measures as well, with the aim of improving the Roma women position, the life quality of Roma children, as well as the entire Roma community. The survey results show that Roma women, who have given birth to four or more children, believe that the ideal number of children is 'two'. This indicates that women in the Roma community do not participate in family planning and decision-making about procreation. According to previous research conducted in Serbia, the most important reason for the birth of more children in the Roma population is the traditional socio-cultural pattern, in which giving birth to children, especially sons, is the most important role of women. Mediators often cite a lack of knowledge about contraception, and lack of money for abortion, as important reasons. Thirdly, social benefits, child benefits and parental allowance represent important causes of higher fertility among Roma women (Rašević, 2015). The issue of fertile characteristics of the Roma population in the municipality of Bela Palanka, requires new research and complex approach to the problem. When it comes to anti-birth measures, the following specific measure is proposed: (1) education of the Roma population about the use of contraception and the possibilities for improving the quality of life, through a mediator for the Roma community, and the participation of municipal organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and voluntary work.

8. Conclusions

The decline in fertility in Serbia is mostly the result of changes in family patterns, due to the rapid modernization of society, rapid migration from rural to urban areas and higher participation of women in the labor force. The consequences of decades of falling fertility rates are fixed, and at the present time are clearly evident, both at the macro and micro level. Demographic problems which are typical for virtually the whole of Serbia are most evident at the level of smaller territorial entities, such as local government units.

The municipality of Bela Palanka is facing the same demographic problems as most other communities in Serbia. Reduction of the total population, an aging population and depopulation of rural settlements are processes that in this municipality began in the sixties of the twentieth century. Given the fact that the level of fertility is a major element of the natural demographic development, it is therefore one of the most important initiators of demographic change. Therefore, an urgent intervention of the local authorities in the implementation of pro-natality population policy measures are needed, in order to place demographic trends in the desired direction, and achieve satisfactory results for a longer period.

The research results indicate that the most common reasons for low birth in the municipality of Bela Palanka are the following: low income, unemployment, high cost of raising children and an uncertain future of the family. In terms of the population policy measures that could act in stimulating birth, respondents indicated themselves mainly all the above measures as 'very' important, pointing out that the financial

measures should be ahead of the rest. In addition there is a need to introduce certain birth control measures in the municipality. These would be implemented only on the part of the Roma population who still live a traditional way of life. A very big problem of reproductive behavior of this population is adolescent fertility. This and other issues related to the situation of Roma women require new research. Policy measures to mitigate the low fertility address only one segment of the population policy. To resolve the range of demographic problem in the municipality of Bela Palanka it is necessary to create a comprehensive population policy, which would in addition to the birth rate (fertility), deal with the issues of migration, the internal distribution of population, aging population and others.

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