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Boosting Development through Population Growth in the Greek Periphery: The Case of Rodopi, Greece¹

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Abstract

Rodopi (Rhodope), a peripheral region in northeastern Greece, faces significant demographic challenges characterized by population decline, aging, and negative net migration. This policy brief explores these challenges and proposes a set of policy recommendations to revitalize Rodopi's demographics and stimulate regional development. The recommendations focus on attracting and retaining young people, supporting families, and promoting economic opportunities.

Keywords: family, Greece, growth, periphery, population, public policy, regional development, Rhodope, Rodopi, social policy.

Introduction

Greek periphery, particularly regions with similar characteristics to Rodopi, faces significant challenges related to declining population and unfavorable demographic trends (Foundation for Economic & Industrial Research, 2022). The situation demands urgent attention and strategic interventions to reverse these trends and foster sustainable development. This policy brief examines the socio-economic dynamics of Rodopi and proposes a multifaceted approach to boost population and demographics in the region. Drawing on current data available and policy recommendations, it suggests targeted measures to enhance economic opportunities, improve infrastructure, promote social inclusion, and incentivize population growth. This policy brief also proposes realistic policy recommendations based on the socio-economic reality, with reasoned and deliverable goals. It is an endeavor to analyze the underlying causes of population decline in Rodopi and propose evidence-based strategies to revitalize the region, develop a comprehensive strategy to reverse negative demographic trends and promote the region's long-term viability, prosperity, and growth.

Concerning Rodopi

The regional unit of Rodopi is situated in the northeastern part of Greece and is one of the 74 regional units the Hellenic Republic consists of. Rodopi is a crossroad of cultures, languages and religions,

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bordering with Bulgaria and being located only a few kilometers from the Greco-turkish border. The town of Komotini is its largest settlement and its regional, capital town. Komotini is also the administrative center of the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. According to the most recent population census of 2021, Rodopi's resident population is 104,262, a number lowered by 6.9% compared to the previous population census of 2011, whilst the national population has only been lowered by 3.1% (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2023). Komotini is one of the 20 most populated cities in Greece, home to 11 of the 31 Departments of the Democritus University of Thrace and approximately 10,000 university students.

An industrial zone is located near Komotini that is now a mere shadow of its former prosperous past. Until the 2008 Crisis devastated Greece, the Komotini Industrial Zone was home to many major industries and factories which vitalized the local, regional and national economy by producing exportable goods and supporting thousands of scientists, technicians, clerks and workers. Only a few of them still operate there today.

Rodopi exemplifies the demographic challenges which many peripheral regions both in Europe and Greece confront. Extensive outward migration, particularly among younger generations, coupled with low birth rates, has resulted in population decline and an aging population structure (Kotzamanis, 2024). Many young people emigrate from the area to other European Countries like Germany, The Netherlands, Norway etc. This trend threatens the region's social and economic cohesion as well as sustainability.

Rodopi's population has steadily declined over the past decades, (Παπανδρέου & Λογοθέτης, 2021). The region's population is aging. The percentage of the elderly population (aged 65+) in Rodopi is significantly higher compared to the national average. This trend is projected to continue, putting a strain on social services and healthcare systems (Aassve et al., 2020). At the same time, negative net migration is affecting the general situation. The younger generations seem to face harder socio-economic conditions in Greece in terms of unemployment (Papadakis et al., 2022) and lack of opportunities (Koniordos, 2017). Young people, particularly those with higher education degrees, are more likely to migrate out of Rodopi seeking better employment opportunities and higher living standards (Giannakis & Tsampis, 2022), either moving to Thessaloniki⁴, Athens⁵, either abroad⁶. These highly skilled young people can contribute with their knowledge and expertise in their fields in the country's development (Koniordos, 2017). As for that matter, Labrianidis and Sykas (2024)

⁴ A major city of northern Greece and country's second largest after the capital.

⁵ The capital city of Greece and the country's largest city.

⁶ Within the European Union or elsewhere.

have found a slight but statistically significant positive effect of Greek PhD holders who return to Greece on the country's figures concerning patent applications and academic citations.

Rodopi exhibits several socio-economic characteristics that contribute to its population decline. There are many economic challenges as the region suffers from limited economic diversification, with agriculture being the primary sector. However, agricultural activities alone cannot sustain a vibrant economy, leading to outmigration of the working-age population which is seeking better opportunities elsewhere in Greece or abroad (Papadopoulos & Baltas 2023).

Furthermore, infrastructure deficits block the region from making the most of the opportunities it has for growth and flourishing. Inadequate infrastructure, including transportation networks and healthcare facilities, further exacerbates the region's isolation and hinders economic development (Bakogiannis & Tsoukalas, 2019).

With a declining population, an aging demographic profile, and limited economic opportunities, Rodopi faces an uncertain future unless proactive measures are taken.

Policy Recommendations

The recommended policies in this policy brief are meant to be holistic and multifaceted. They need to target economic diversification and entrepreneurship promotion, infrastructure development, improving quality of life, social inclusion and community engagement, population incentives and family support.

All that said, policies should include:

- Targeted investment: Attraction and retention of businesses by providing tax incentives, subsidies, and infrastructure development in strategic sectors aligned with Rodopi's strengths (Martimort & Rodriguez-Pose, 2014).
- Encouragement towards the development of new industries and support for entrepreneurship through targeted financial incentives, business incubators, and access to capital (Drouvelis, Kontis & Liakopoulos, 2023).
- Digital nomad initiatives: creation of co-working spaces and remote work opportunities to attract digital nomads and remote workers, injecting fresh ideas and skills into the local economy (Füller, 2021).
- Investing in infrastructure: upgrading transportation networks, roads, railways (trains do not operate in the area for some years now), and public transportation in general.

- Reinforcing healthcare facilities and social services in general in order to support existing families and potential newcomers.
- Developing cultural amenities: investing in cultural and recreational facilities to enhance the overall quality of life in Rodopi and foster a sense of community (Florida, 2002).
- Childcare subsidies: implementation of policies that make childcare more affordable, enabling parents, particularly women, to participate more actively in the workforce (Waldfogel, 2019).
- Facilitation of employment programs for parents with three children or more, aiming in providing them with job security and career opportunities in industry, education, healthcare and public administration.
- Introduction of more tax breaks aimed at encouraging families to have more children, through the provision of high-quality health, social and education public services.
- Leveraging cultural heritage: development and promotion of cultural tourism initiatives that showcase Rodopi's unique cultural heritage and natural beauty, as a valuable asset, a model that suits Greece's profile as a tourist destination (Apostolakis, 2003).

Conclusion

Demographic change is a multidimensional issue; hence it is of vital significance stakeholders from many sectors need to participate in large-scale synergies (Foundation for Economic & Industrial Research, 2022). Rodopi's demographic challenges require a multifaceted policy approach. By focusing on economic development, improving quality of life, supporting families, and promoting the region's unique identity, policymakers can create an environment that attracts and retains young people, strengthens families, and fosters a more vibrant future for the region.

This policy brief, by utilizing existing knowledge, is only about a modest endeavor in order to offer policymakers, stakeholders and local authorities a holistic approach that simultaneously addresses economic, infrastructural, social, and demographic issues. By implementing the proposed policy recommendations, in conjunction with community engagement and stakeholder collaboration, Rodopi can unlock its potential for sustainable development, foster inclusive growth, and create a brighter future for its residents. Geography, natural and cultural wealth can function in the region's interest.

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