

# **SUPER-AGED SOCIETY: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE POPULATION POLICY IN JAPAN?**

**Branislav Bleha**

---

## **Abstract**

Nowadays, the Japanese population is one of the oldest in the World from demographical point of view. The key aim of the study is defined as presentation of some adaptation and mitigation tools which are commonly used in Japan. Results of the research doing within research fellowship stay are used here. The questionnaire, expert talks, review of the literature and documents were the main methods to be used. The main attention is given to the regional and local levels, as the strong depopulation has been occurring since 50s in the rural areas of Japan especially. This depopulation was tightly connected with the massive industrialization and urbanization of the country. Thus, one can see some similarities with the previous developmental trajectories of Slovakia, the Czech republic, and other (post) socialist countries, though having been run under completely different political conditions. Such country with a long “tradition” of ageing has also the long-term and sophisticated approach to the management of ageing and depopulation in general. This is why some measures are introduced and discussion about their appropriateness for quickly ageing post-socialist regional and local populations seems to be the suitable goal of the study.

**Key words:** Depopulation, Ageing, Survey, Strategy, Adaptation

**JEL Code:** J10, J11

---

## **Introduction**

The main idea of the research is to compare “traditionally” aged population of Japan with the relatively young but very rapidly ageing population of Slovakia. We get the fellowship from the Japan foundation for one month during September 2011. The goal was to find some similarities in the population trajectories and the factors of population change at the national, sub-national and local levels. The special attention was paid to the local level as the ageing in rural areas of both countries seems to be substantial in much regional cases. The main partial goals represent as follows.

1. To conduct the comparative geographical and demographic analysis of the countries with the special attention paid to the population prospects by investigating the results of existing population forecasts.
2. To make some overview of literature and documents, planes and strategies with respect to the depopulation and ageing in Japan, potentially appropriate for using in countries in transformation.
3. To use qualitative methods to make detailed survey in selected municipalities within Gifu prefecture. We used questionnaire method and expert method.

In the recently issued article (Bleha, 2011) we present some basic results, the main differences between the countries from the population policies' point of view. Unlike that article, here we would like to pay attention to the illustration of the intensity of depopulation in Japan and to the qualitative survey and questionnaire' s results. The other parts of the research we introduce only very briefly. Japan with its massive rural-urban out-migration, local and regional depopulation tendencies as well developed population strategies, seems to be fitting case study for developing strategies in countries such as Slovakia, the Czech republic, and other post-socialistic countries.

## **1 Selection of the modeling area**

In the first step, the geographical approach was needed for identification of the modeling area. Since our colleagues work at Gifu university, we verify the Gifu prefecture is suitable for research. The first step was comparative analyses in order to get picture about the position of Gifu -prefecture within Japan from the population change point of view. We used here some basic demographical indicators for natural dynamics, migration and development of the age structure. Both population change and population structure are bounded each other closely, influencing mutually. Thus we obtain the basic picture about position of the Gifu prefecture among other Japanese prefectures. Of course, basic geographical characteristics have been included to be preliminary important step, because of strong dependence of population dynamics on the geographical determinants such as the peripherality (see Džupinová et al., 2008), the spatial structure of area, distances to main cities, winter and overall climate conditions, and others.

It seems to be interesting that Gifu prefecture of these days is as well in future will be quite similar to the Japanese "demographical average". Thus, it represents a very suitable study area for such a research. Moreover, the existence of bipolarity between increasing or stable

municipalities on one side and depopulating municipalities on the other side occurs in this prefecture. That fact also allows us to find some new facts especially with regard to migration change and migration flows, using for instance theory of Push – Pull factors and some macro-economical theories. These factors matter seriously in Gifu prefecture according our investigation. We can also conclude that the same or similar geographical factors play the role in migration patterns both within Japanese and Slovak regions. Strong urbanization and industrialization occurred after Second World War in both countries influencing the rapid increase of the share of urban population, environmental problems, and depopulation of the rural areas. Of course, the processes run under quite different political conditions of the capitalistic (Japan) and socialistic (Slovakia) country. However, the results of the processes seem to be very analogous.

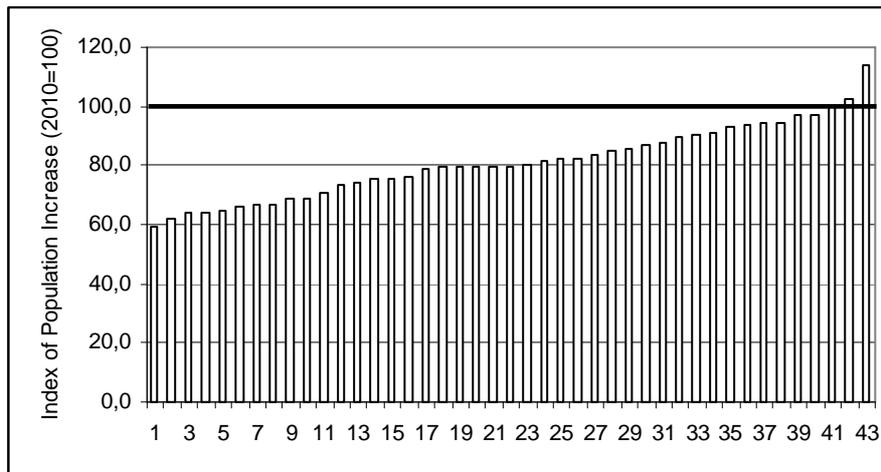
The Gifu prefecture is located in the hearth of Japan. Its geographical location is very favorable thanks to the good accession from the main metropolitan areas of Tokyo and Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe, moreover, the Gifu-city itself is the part of the Nagoya metropolitan area, only 40 km distant from the core of Nagoya city. The prefecture belongs to the largest in Japan with respect to the area (7<sup>th</sup> in the ranking), however the population density of 195 inhabitants/sq. km is substantially below the Japanese average. The prefecture consists of two geographically differed parts. The southern part calls like Mino, the northern like Hida. The prefecture is forested with the typical mountainous character. This fact influences depopulation in rural areas of prefecture. Since the southern part of prefecture belongs to the so called Pacific industrial belt, the strong outmigration from the smaller rural settlements occurred in last decades. Nowadays, the outmigration has been still continued under influence of the strong economical nodes like Nagoya city, Gifu city and others.

We had selected some municipalities, in which survey was done. Thanks to the perfect statistical data, we can deeply analyse all the municipalities<sup>1</sup>. The figure Nr. 1 shows the results of population forecast until 2035 for municipalities of Gifu prefecture. As the figure shows, the depopulation will going on very markedly. Only two of 43 municipalities will be having more inhabitants than in 2010. Conversely, half of the municipalities will lose at least 20% of population of 2010.

---

<sup>1</sup> Besides, we used the geographical knowledge of our colleagues at Gifu University, namely prof. Kobayashi and prof. Ohzeki.

**Fig. 1: Population growth 2010-2035 in the municipalities of Gifu prefecture**



Source: Population forecast of municipalities until 2035 (NIPSS, Tokyo)

## 2 Overview of selected studies and documents

Though have been introduced in previous article already, it is worth of effort briefly to introduce some studies being aimed at the efforts to deal with the negative consequences of population shrinking at local level. Local level is represented by municipalities in Japan. Their number has been decreasing gradually, as an effort to manage the processes more effectively. Of course process of the amalgamation is strongly bound with the depopulation especially in the rural areas. For instance, the Gifu prefectural number of municipalities has been decreased from 106 to 42 during the period from 1960 to 2011. We would like to note that the process of amalgamation (establishment of larger united municipalities) has still not been carried out in Slovakia. Thus, there are more than 2900 autonomous settlements in Slovakia, several of them being very poorly populous.

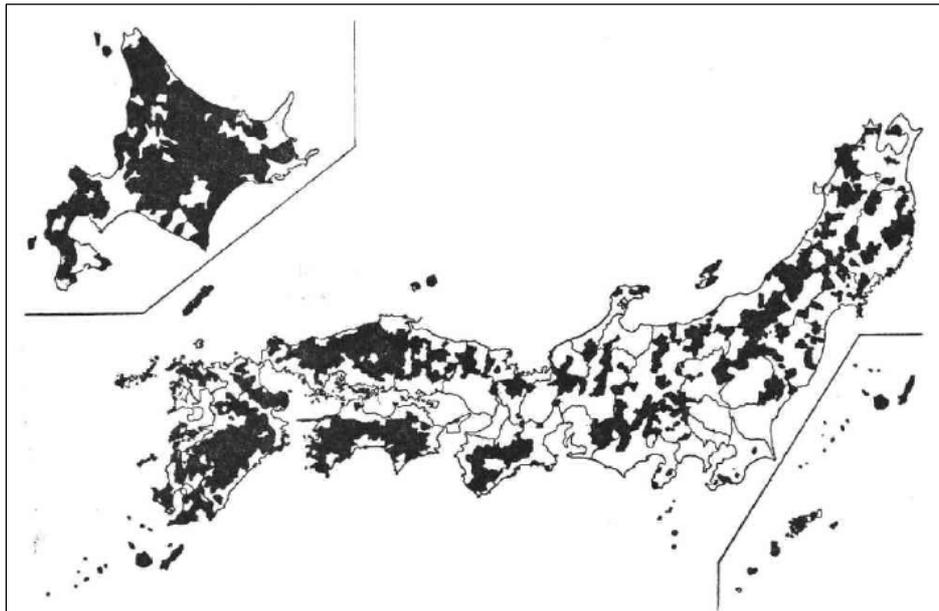
We put following both single local case studies as well general studies on depopulation in rural areas. Interesting study about the role of local promoting associations as case study of Kawane village (nowadays being part of Akitaka-city in Hiroshima prefecture) was issued (Doo-Chul - Hye-Jin, 2009). The study points out how such association is able to sustain rural live in depopulating village with the mindset “our village on our hands”. Such association plays role of the middleman between locals and municipal office. Another interesting study was published about 14 ago (Sullivan 1997). The author discussed the ways how to sustain rural areas, inhabitants of which are not able to be active in traditional primary or secondary sectors more. He investigated efforts to move from previous traditional economical activities to the tertiary sector (“tourism for sustaining traditional ways of life“). Aging of rural Japan

from the sociological and social point of view is under discussion in study of Tanaka - Iwasawa (2010). The authors discuss the role and impact of phenomenon such as rural celibacy, conjugal family system, “*sekentei*” – authors bring there some examples of studies dealt with. They describe *sekentei* as follows. People still value their privacy and many feel embarrassed in asking public services for support. Family caregivers are sometimes reluctant to use formal health, social, and nursing services. Murakami et al. (2009) bring the view on potential influence of so-called multihabitation on rural areas in Japan. Inhabitants coming into retire age could be some actors of revival of the rural areas. They want to spend some time in rural space instead of urban live. The case study was concerned about Hokkaido region.

Besides the scientific studies, some legislative and planning documents were analyzed. We used the review of documents in the study Kakiuchi and Hasegawa (1979). They clarify very the depopulation after 1945 very distinctly with respect to the factors of depopulation. Among others interesting results, following fact may be stressed. The number of young graduated at high schools, who stayed at farm, fell to only 5% in 1950s. That means 95% of young people moved to the cities. Such share was not common in the socialistic countries despite the strong urbanization. This brought the steep decrease in public services and the consequent out-migration due to lower quality of live. At the figure 1 the black regions are depopulated areas spreading through the whole country, especially in Hokkaido region, Shikoku, Kyushu and the Eastern part of the Honshu-island (Chugoku region). This illustrates how substantial and intensive the depopulation in Japan was in last decades, and how the bipolarity between nodes and peripheries rose up with respect to the human capital and population change. The authors of the study overviewed also the set of documents and programs released in order to solve the depopulation areas ´problems. The authors mentioned the general planes firstly, for instance Remote Island Promotion Act (*Rito shinko-ho*) of 1953, one of the first Acts after 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. The Special Policy for Heavy Snow Areas (*Gosetsu chitai taisaku tokubetsu sochi-ho*) was introduced in 1962, subsequently the Mountain Village Promotion Act (*Sanson shinkoho*) in 1965. The problem oh heavy snow will continue in mountainous regions, still causing serious damage for inhabitants (Kobayashi 2007). As we could see in Gifu municipalities, some houses are being seriously damaged by heavy snow, and the local governments have to organize the removal of snow every winter. Of course, these inappropriate winter living conditions make people to move to other places. The authors underlined that the first legislation addressed directly to the problems of depopulation on the national scale was the Emergency Act for the Improvement of Depopulated Areas (*Kaso chiiki taisaku kinkyu sochi-*

ho), passed in 1970. Within the Act, for the first time the substantial financial account was distributed to the depopulated areas. The support could have been used for developing facilities, constructing roads and other activities, in order to improve the overall quality of live. Later, some other acts and programs were released. We would like to stress also the report freely translated as Current situation in Settlements in depopulated Areas, published in March 2011 by Ministry of internal affairs and communication. The survey included 800 depopulated areas (Kaso-chiiki areas) all over the Japan. The local governments have been asked the set of questions with regard to the current situation, main social and economical problems, policy actions, opinions about the future trajectory of municipalities. Among others the problems of decrease of job opportunities and land degradation (abandonment) are underlined by local representatives. This is no very surprised, however the consequence also for human capital are enormous. The number of local actors is decreasing in the settlements as the locals are dying out and they are not being replaced by younger inhabitants.

**Fig. 2: Depopulated areas of Japan in 1975**



Source: Originally published in the study of Kakiuchi and Hasegawa (1979)

### **3 Concluding remarks on the qualitative survey**

We visited some municipalities and settlements during our fellow in Japan. We can conclude, that the population question “matters” among the regional and local decision makers. The discussion of depopulation is very traditional for several decades. The visited municipalities

have perfect statistics, population forecasts and projections, and they conduct population measures both of the adaptation and mitigation character. They prepared official documents expressly devoted to the population strategies. For instance, the Gifu prefectural office makes strategy for attract new inhabitants to the rural parts of the Gifu prefecture with the slogan like “I want to live in the fresh air country”, or “Let you start to live the rural life”. Thus, the fight for new inhabitants is common form of the population strategy in Japan. This is different from the situation in Slovakia, in which the population questions are only at the beginning. In each municipality we visited, they are local officers responsible for population and social development, and they are able to discuss and explain the population aspects very deeply. In some municipalities assistants for elderly people help them in every-day life. Our pilot questionnaire demonstrates that local governments take care to the problems of population developments in Gifu prefecture. The first part of questionnaire we asked local officers about their perception of population change. All officers who send the answers expect the population problem like raising one in future. Most of them are also familiar with the recent population forecast of municipalities released by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. All of them agree that using of the population forecasts is necessary for decision making with no doubt. Local officers also suppose that the process of depopulation is either completely irreversible or can be changed only to the limited range. Most of them agree that both mitigation (active) and adaptation measures (see Lutz, 2007) have the same importance in managing population development of municipalities.

### **Acknowledgment**

This research was financially supported by the Japan Foundation within the Fellowship Program for Intellectual Exchange 2011-2012.

We would also like to thank Mr. Kobayashi, Mr. Ohzeki and Mr. Takase from Gifu University, Mr. Koike and Mr. Shimizu from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research in Tokyo, the officers of the Gifu prefectural office and selected municipalities in Gifu prefecture.

### **References**

Bleha, B. – Kobayashi, K. – Ohzeki, Y. (2011). Urban and Rural Local Population Policies in Japan and the Slovak republic. *Forum Statisticum Slovacum*, Vol. 7, Nr. 6., pp. 21-27.

Doo-Chul, K. – Hie-Jin. B. (2009). Coping with depopulation and demographic ageing in rural Japan. From government to local governance. In: *Revija za geografijo – Journal for Geography*, Nr. 1, pp. 77-88.

Džupinová, E. et al. (2008). *Periférnosť a priestorová polarizácia na území Slovenska*. Bratislava, Geo-grafika, 183 p.

Kakiuchi, G. H. – Hasegawa, M. (1979). Recent trends in rural to urban migration in Japan: The problem of depopulation, online (20.6.2011)

<http://ir.library.tohoku.ac.jp/re/bitstream/10097/45077/1/AA0045945079483.pdf>

Kobayashi, K. (2007). Some problems with living conditions in a mountain village in Japan: Especially the problem of heavy snow. In: *Progress in Sustainable Rural Development*, IGU, Commission on the Sustainable Development of Rural Systems, pp. 98-107.

Lutz, W. (2007). Adaptation versus mitigation policies on demographic change in Europe. In: *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, pp. 19-25.

Murakami, K. – Gilroy, R. – Atterton, J. (2009). Planning for the ageing countryside in Japan: The potential impact of multihabitation. In: *Planning Practice and Research*, Nr. 3, pp. 285-299.

Nishioka, H. et al. (2011). Population projection by prefecture in Japan: 2005-2035. Outline of results and methods. In: *The Japanese journal of population*. Nr. 1, pp. 1-39.

Sullivan, A. (1997). Planning to sustain depopulating communities: Japan and the USA. In: *International Planning Studies*. Nr. 2, pp. 391-402.

Tanaka, K. – Iwasawa, M. (2010). Aging in rural Japan – Limitations in the current Social Care Policy. In: *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*. Nr. 4, pp. 394-406.

### **Contact**

Branislav Bleha

Comenius University, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Department of Human Geography and Demogeography

bleha@fns.uniba.sk