

INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT



SMALL LIVING VILLAGES

**Segura de Baños (Teruel)
Spain**

23-24/09/2025



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INTRODUCTION

"Rural areas are the social fabric of our society and the engine of our economy. They are an essential element of our identity and economic potential. We will value and preserve our rural areas and invest in their future".

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission

"The depopulation of rural areas is a growing concern that threatens the territorial cohesion of the European Union. It is essential to implement comprehensive policies that foster economic development, improve public services, and attract new generations to these regions."

Raffaele Fitto, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms

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EUROPE



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The EU population is aging and will begin to slowly decline over the next decade. The population of rural areas is already older on average than that of towns, suburbs, and cities. On average, rural regions have experienced a population decline in recent years, primarily due to negative natural population growth that has not been offset by sufficient positive net migration. Some eastern and southern member states face both challenges, as their rural regions have experienced both negative natural growth and negative net migration. Additionally, young women are more likely to leave rural areas than young men. These demographic trends, combined with a lack of connectivity, infrastructure challenges, low productivity, and limited access to public services, including education and healthcare, can make rural areas less attractive places to live and work..

Rural areas in Europe, a vibrant tapestry of life and landscapes, provide us with food, homes, jobs, and essential ecosystem services. To ensure that rural areas continue to play these essential roles, the European Commission published in June 2021 a **Communication titled "A Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas,"** aiming to achieve stronger, more connected, resilient, and prosperous rural communities by 2040. The Communication outlined the challenges and concerns affecting rural areas and highlighted some of the opportunities available to them. Subsequently, the **EU Rural Action Plan and the Rural Pact** established actions and instruments to achieve the vision's objectives. The outcomes of the Rural Pact Conference held in Uppsala (Sweden) in May 2023 and the High-Level Forum on the Future of Rural Areas held in Sigüenza (Spain) in September 2023 also contributed to shaping the Council Conclusions of November 20, 2023, recognizing that demographic changes negatively impact rural areas, particularly leading to depopulation.

The Council Conclusions of November 20, 2023, emphasize the importance of investments in various sectors, including agriculture, and the need for structural changes on the ground to keep rural areas populated and viable, promote smart development, and take full advantage of ecological and digital transitions. This includes addressing predominant rural **depopulation**, demographic decline, and aging by providing training and other support measures for upskilling and reskilling, particularly in digital skills and rural development.

Depopulation is not exclusive to rural regions; it can also affect other regions in the European Union (EU) that have been left behind. However, many predominantly rural regions, often on the northern, southern, and eastern edges of the EU, have experienced



migration to cities or even emigration to other EU countries in search of economic prosperity.

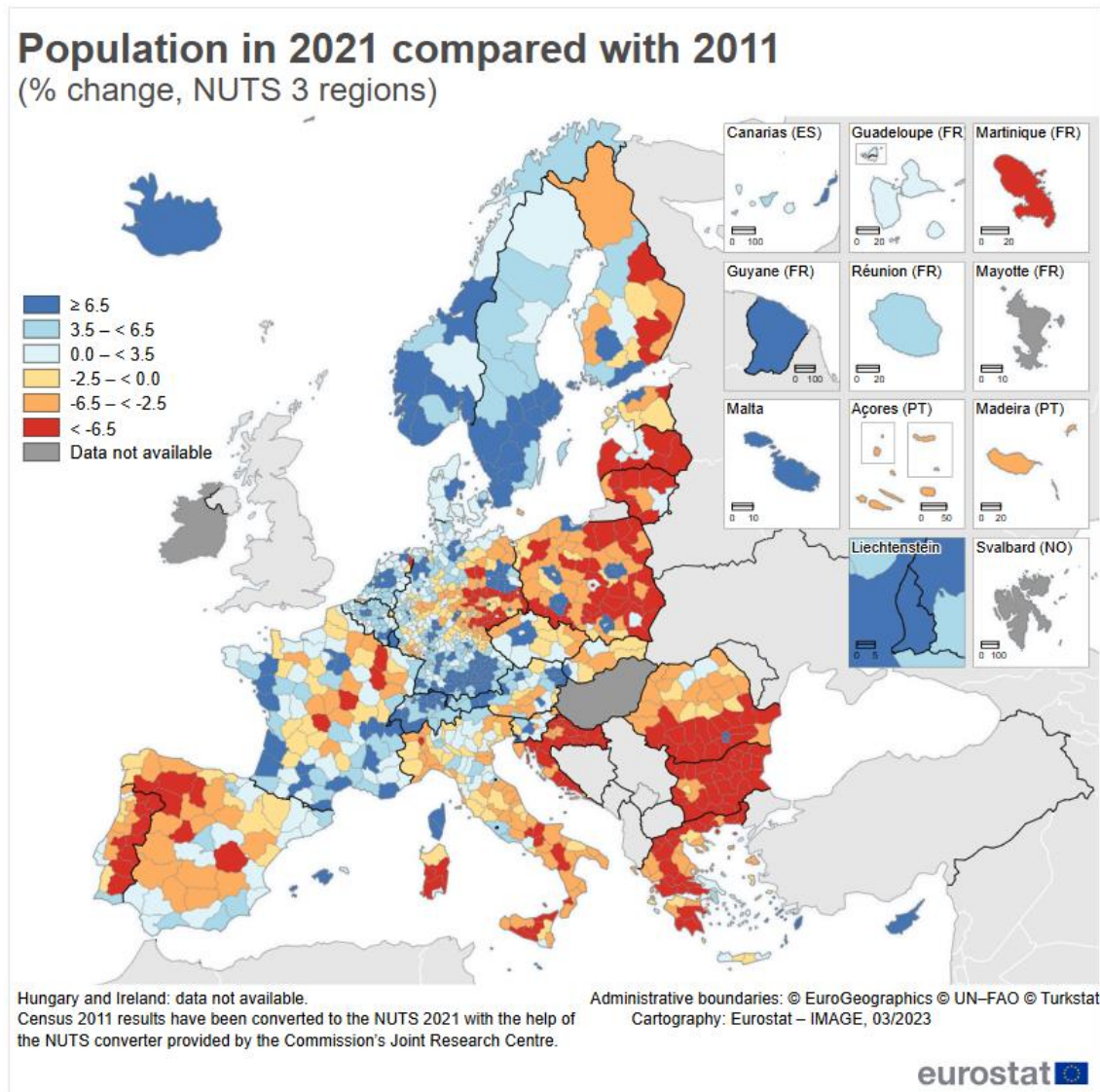


Figure 1. Population 2021 compared to 2011. (Source: EUROSTAT)

Eurostat details territorial units—provinces, in the case of Spain—that show a very clear trend across Spanish territory: **depopulated Spain continued to lose** inhabitants, while the already densely populated areas kept attracting new residents.

The 442 million inhabitants recorded in the EU in 2021 are concentrated in specific areas that, in total, cover a smaller surface than the uninhabited parts of the territory. This reality is particularly evident in **Spain, the country with the most depopulated areas in the EU**, according to the European Statistical Office (Eurostat).

At the other extreme, Eurostat highlights that **Madrid and Barcelona were the two most populated provinces in Europe in 2021**, with 6.7 and 5.7 million people, respectively, ahead of the third place, which went to Rome (Lazio region), with 4.2 million inhabitants. To add to the records, **Spain is also home to the least populated area classified as NUTS 3**—territorial units smaller than countries and autonomous communities. That is the island of El Hierro, with 11,290 residents.





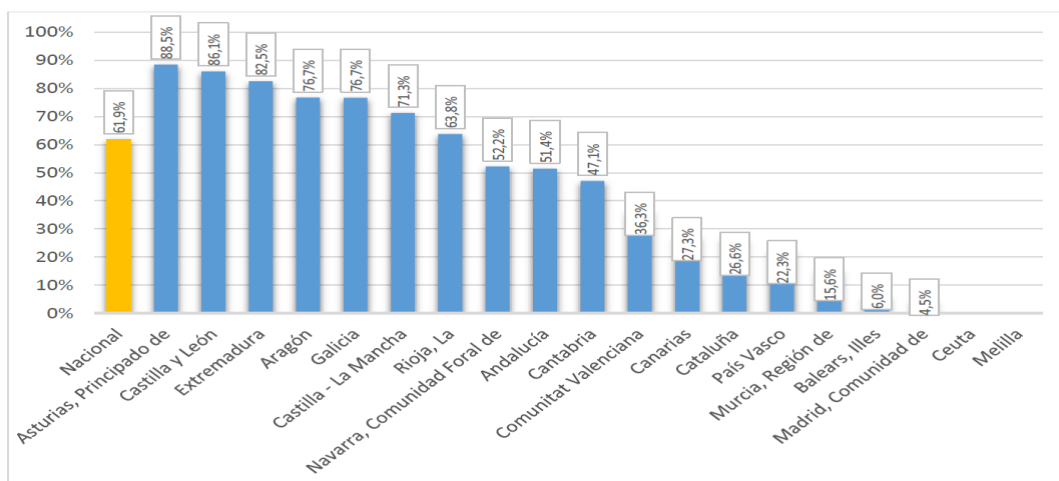
SPAIN



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Situation of Depopulation in Spain

- **9 autonomous communities have lost population throughout the 21st century:** Aragón, Cantabria, Castilla – La Mancha, Comunidad Valenciana, La Rioja, Extremadura, Galicia, Castilla y León, and Asturias.



Fuente: Elaboración propia a partir del INE cifras oficiales de población Padrón municipal

Figura 2. Percentage of municipalities losing population in the 21st century (2001-2008) by Autonomous Communities. (Source: National Institute of Statistics, Municipal Register)

- Out of the 8,131 municipalities in Spain, **5,102 have been losing population since 2001**. Over the last decade, **the number has risen to 6,232 municipalities**.
- In Spain **there are 6,815 municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants**, home to a total of **5.7 million people**. Over the last decade, 5,620 of these municipalities have lost population, amounting to 410,000 people.
- In municipalities **with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants**, depopulation affects **86%** of nearly 5,000 localities. **These municipalities house more than 1.4 million people**, but in the past decade, **they have lost over 200,000 residents**.



- **29 provincial capitals have lost population in the last decade.**

Tasas de variación de población 2011-2018 por tamaño de municipio

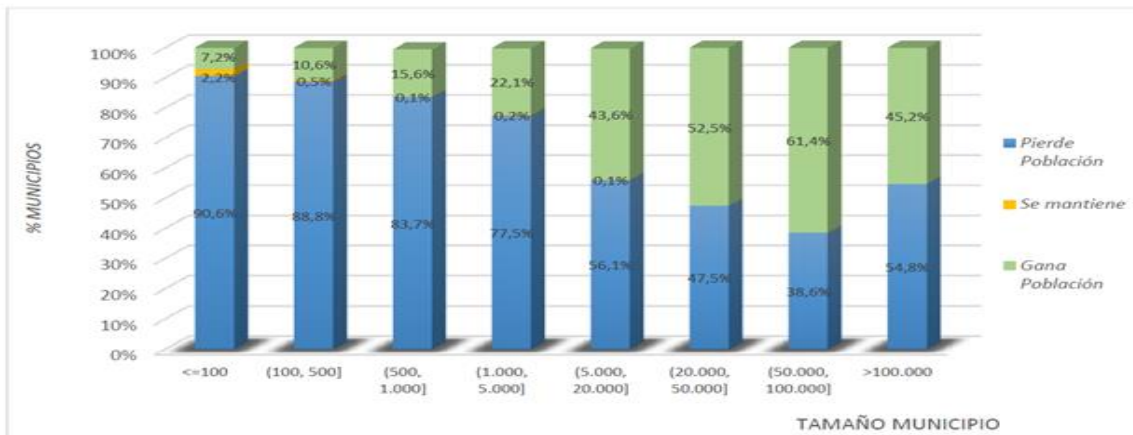


Figura 3. Population variation rates 2011-2018 by municipality size. (Source: National Institute of Statistics, Municipal Register)

- Issues **Related to Low Population Density**, Challenges in providing basic services.
 - Spain has **3,926 municipalities** with a **population density below 12.5 inhabitants/km²**, the threshold considered by the EU as a **demographic risk**..
- Effects of an Aging Population.
 - Spain now has **nearly 9 million people over the age of 65**, representing **1 in 5 citizens**.
 - In municipalities with **fewer than 5,000 inhabitants**, **1.5 million people are over 65 years old**.
- In those with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, **3 out of 10 residents are over 65**, and nearly 15% are over 80 years old. Spain's demographic shift has led to a **negative natural population balance since 2015**. Over the past decade, 6,320 municipalities have recorded more deaths than births, and 8 out of 10 municipalities have negative natural growth.

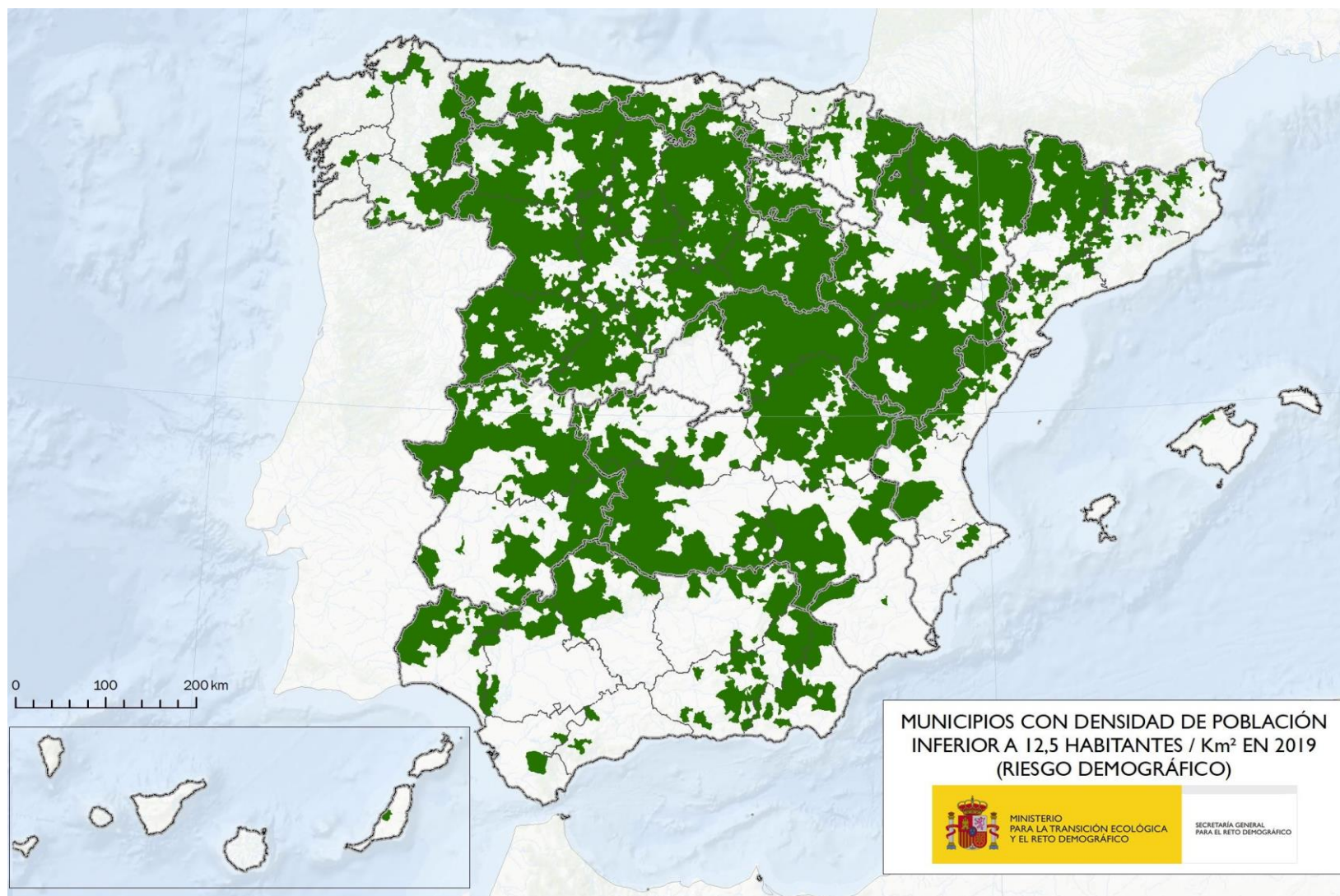


Figura 4. Map of Population Density Below 12.5 Inhabitants/km² (Source: Ministry for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge)



ARAGÓN



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Context: Aragón

Aragón is an autonomous community located in northeastern Spain, covering an area of **47,720 km²**, which represents **9.4% of Spain's territory**. This makes it the fourth-largest community in Spain, behind Castilla y León, Andalucía, and Castilla-La Mancha, and larger than countries such as Switzerland or the Netherlands.

Despite its vast size, Aragón has **1,351,591 inhabitants** as of January 1, 2025 (Source: National Institute of Statistics), ranking as the 11th most populated autonomous community in Spain, accounting for just **2.78% of the total national population**.

Aragón is classified as a level 2 territorial unit (NUTS2) under the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS), as defined by Regulation (EC) 1059/2003, with the code ES24. The autonomous community is part of the NUTS1 territorial unit "Northeast" (ES2), which also includes the Basque Country, Navarre, and La Rioja. At the NUTS3 level, Aragón consists of the provinces of Huesca (ES241), Teruel (ES242), and Zaragoza (ES243).

In addition to these three provinces, Aragón is administratively divided into 33 counties (comarcas) and 731 municipalities.

Municipios por provincia

Rango población	Nº municipios por provincia						
	Huesca	% s/ Huesca	Teruel	% s/ Teruel	Zaragoza	% s/ Zaragoza	Total
0-99	27	13,37%	95	40,25%	85	29,01%	207
100-199	51	25,25%	57	24,15%	54	18,43%	162
200-299	34	16,83%	20	8,47%	33	11,26%	87
300-399	22	10,89%	13	5,51%	20	6,83%	55
400-499	10	4,95%	11	4,66%	9	3,07%	30
>500	58	28,71%	40	16,95%	92	31,40%	190
Total	202	100,00%	236	100,00%	293	100,00%	731
Respecto a Aragón		27,63%		32,28%		40,08%	
Municipios <500 hab s/Aragó		19,70%		26,81%		27,50%	

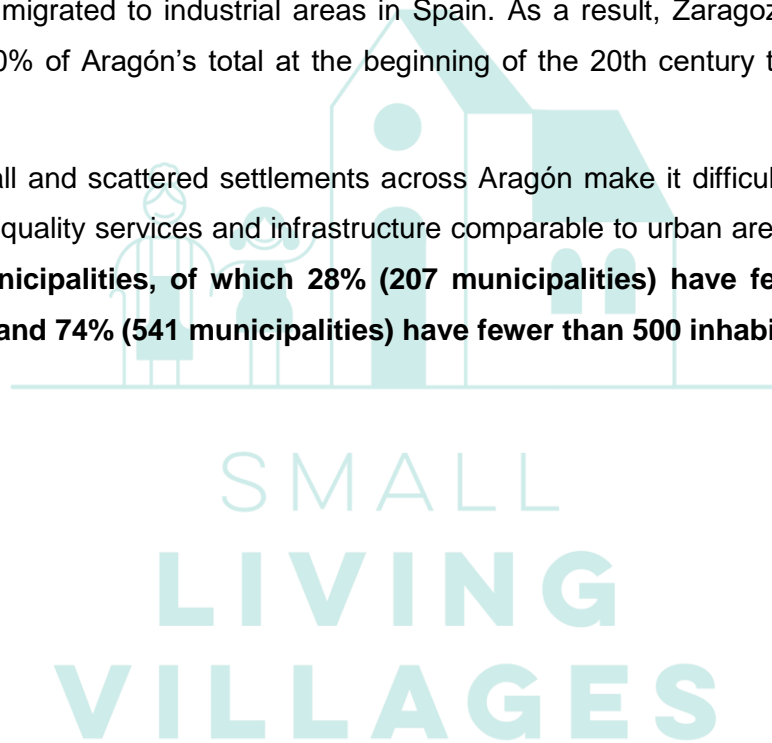
Figura 5. Number of municipalities per province based on population size. (Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Aragonese Institute of Statistics).

Depopulation Data in Aragón

Due to its large area and low population, Aragón has a low population density of **28.32 inhabitants/km²**, significantly below the national average of 97 inhabitants/km². When excluding the most populated areas, nearly **70% of Aragón's territory has a density below 8 inhabitants/km², and 37% is below 4 inhabitants/km²**. In 2016, 473 municipalities in Aragón had a population density below 8 inhabitants/km², covering 63% of the region's surface. By 2024, this number increased to 484 municipalities, 317 of which have fewer than 4 inhabitants/km².

The low population and slow growth in Aragón have been accompanied by mass depopulation, particularly between 1950 and 1970. Many people moved to Zaragoza, while others migrated to industrial areas in Spain. As a result, Zaragoza's population grew from 10% of Aragón's total at the beginning of the 20th century to over 50% in 2024.

The small and scattered settlements across Aragón make it difficult and costly to provide high-quality services and infrastructure comparable to urban areas. The region has **731 municipalities, of which 28% (207 municipalities) have fewer than 100 inhabitants and 74% (541 municipalities) have fewer than 500 inhabitants.**



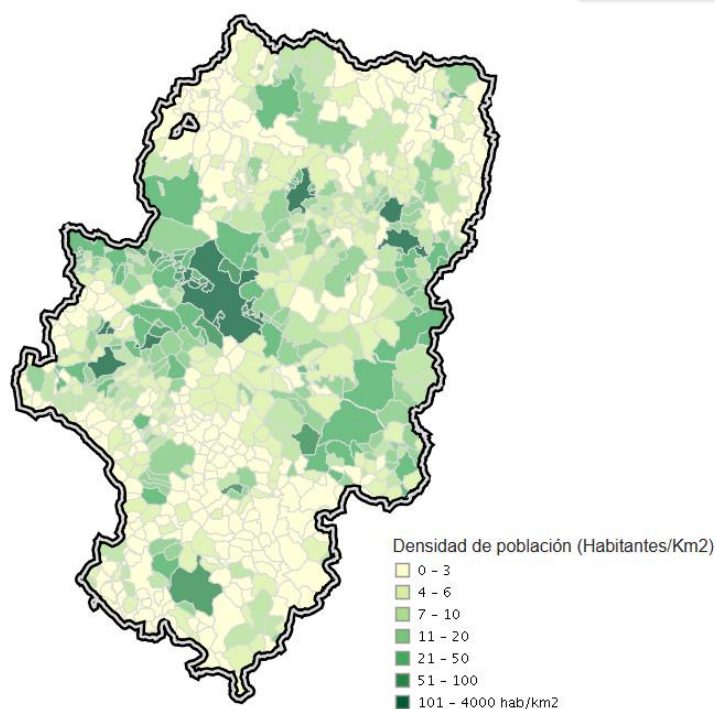


Figura 6. Municipal Population Density in 2024. (Source: Aragonese Institute of Statistics and Atlas of Aragón).

Key Indicators of Aragón's Negative Demographic Trend:

- **Natural Population Balance (Births vs. Deaths):** Aragón has had a **negative** natural population balance since the 1980s, whereas Spain as a whole only reached this point in 2015.

In 2023, Aragón's natural population balance was -3.85 per thousand, compared to the national average of -2.35 per thousand. The province of Teruel had the most severe decline, with -5.96 per thousand.

- **Aging Population:** Aragón ranks 58th among European regions (NUTS2) in terms of aging. In Spain, it is the **sixth most aged autonomous community**, which significantly impacts public service costs in healthcare and social services. The **aging index** in Aragón was **129.19% in 2024**. At a local level, out of Aragón's 731 municipalities, 195 municipalities (26.68%) have an aging index above the regional average. In extreme cases, 685 municipalities (93.71%) have aging ratios above 55%, meaning there are 55 or more people aged 65+ for every 100 people under 19.

- **Gender Imbalance (Masculinity Index):** Rural areas have a high masculinity rate, mainly due to limited job opportunities for women in the primary sector and sociological factors that led to mass female migration. In **2024**, the masculinity index was **95,95 in Zaragoza, 103,08 in Huesca and 103,08 in Teruel**. At a county level, the highest masculinity rates were observed in Sierra de Albarracín (122,08%), Campo de Daroca (118,17%) and Campo de Belchite (115,11%).

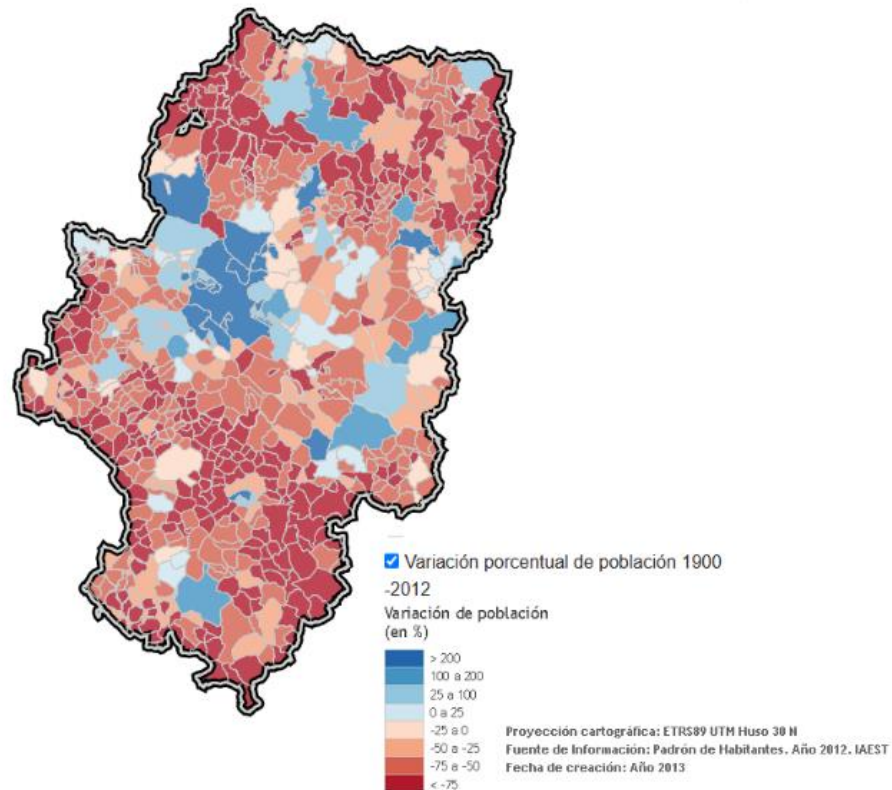


Figura 7. Percentage Variation in Population (1900-2012). (Source: Aragonese Institute of Statistics and Atlas of Aragón).

MOTIVATION

Depopulation is one of the greatest challenges facing Aragón, particularly in its rural areas, where population density is among the lowest in Europe. This issue not only affects the region itself but also has economic, social, and cultural repercussions. Organizing an International Congress on Depopulation in Aragón responds to the need to:

1. **Raise awareness** at the national and international levels, highlighting the specific characteristics of the phenomenon in the region.
2. **Exchange experiences and best practices** with other regions in Spain, Europe and the world facing similar situations.
3. **Encourage innovative solutions** through discussions among experts, institutions, businesses, and civil society.
4. **Promote effective public policies** based on studies and successful experiences from other territories.
5. **Generate development opportunities** through entrepreneurship, digitalization, and territorial enhancement.

The congress aims to analyze the causes and consequences of depopulation in Aragón, promoting viable strategies and solutions to revitalize affected areas. It will address factors such as lack of basic services, population aging, mobility, technological innovation, and housing shortages.

Why Aragón? Key Factors Justifying the Congress:

- **Large territorial extension and low population density:** Aragón has vast depopulated areas, including Teruel, one of the most affected territories in Europe.
- **Aging population:** The average age in rural Aragón is high, with a continuous exodus of young people to cities.
- **Lack of infrastructure and services:** Limited access to healthcare, education, and transport exacerbates the situation and hinders population retention.

- **Ongoing projects and initiatives:** Aragón has been a pioneer in depopulation mitigation strategies, offering valuable models for other regions.



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OBJETIVE

The International Congress on Depopulation in Aragón aims to serve as an academic, European, and social meeting space for exchanging scientific, technical, and territorial knowledge. Through a multidisciplinary approach, it seeks to raise awareness about depopulation and provide the Aragonese Government with direct access to knowledge, proposals, and projects, both theoretical and practical. This will help identify successful cases and solutions applied in Aragón and other European regions facing similar demographic challenges.

In this context, it is crucial to equip depopulated areas with essential services to ensure a high quality of life and promote sustainable development. Access to basic infrastructure such as healthcare, education, transport, and digital connectivity is vital to prevent further abandonment of these territories. Furthermore, policies must be implemented to guarantee equal opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their place of residence. Only through a strong commitment to territorial cohesion can we build a more equitable and balanced society.

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REFLECTION FINAL

Public administrations can address depopulation through passive acceptance, merely palliative management, or—ideally—active and comprehensive governance. The latter aims to achieve living conditions in depopulated rural areas equivalent to those in other regions; and slow down or reverse the complex process of rural exodus.

The Government of Aragón is firmly committed to this proactive and strategic approach, implementing the best solutions based on the most accurate diagnoses.

With this reflective yet action-oriented vision, the First International Congress on Depopulation in Aragón is designed as a space for debate, dialogue, and the productive exchange of ideas, projects, and experiences. It seeks to bring together academic, institutional, and social perspectives, maintaining a universal outlook while focusing on Aragón's unique challenges.

The participation of European institutions and regional representatives is crucial to aligning Aragón's strategies with European policies on cohesion and rural development. Their contributions are expected to:

- Present the current EU framework supporting depopulation and territorial development.
- Explain funding mechanisms available for rural and repopulation projects.
- Highlight successful examples from other European regions facing similar challenges.
- Propose collaborative initiatives between Aragón and EU institutions to implement innovative solutions.
- Listen to and assess Aragón's specific needs to improve access to European funds and resources.