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DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE 1990S CRISIS IN EASTERN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract. The article examines the demographic consequences of the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s in Eastern Kazakhstan. This historical-demographic study is relevant as it helps reveal the historical causes and effects of the current demographic situation. The research employed classical methods and approaches, including historical-comparative, historical-statistical, periodization, and cause-and-effect analysis. The results indicate a decline in population, a decrease in natural growth rates, and an increase in negative migration balance. The findings reflect changes in the demographic structure of the region, features of the age composition, and the impact on socio-economic development.

Keywords: demography, crisis, Eastern Kazakhstan, population, migration, natural growth

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1990-ШЫ ЖЫЛДАРДАҒЫ ДАҒДАРЫСТЫҢ ШЫҒЫС ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ДЕМОГРАФИЯЛЫҚ САЛДАРЫ

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Аңдатпа. Мақалада 1990-жылдардағы әлеуметтік-экономикалық дағдарыстың Шығыс Қазақстандағы демографиялық дамуға әсері қарастырылды. Бұл тарихи-демографиялық зерттеу қазіргі демографиялық жағдайдың тарихи себеп-салдарын ашуға ықпал етуімен өзекті. Жұмыс барысында тарихи-салыстырмалы, тарихи-статистикалық, кезеңдеу (периодизация), себеп-салдарлық талдау сияқты классикалық әдістер мен тәсілдер қолданылды. Зерттеу нәтижесі халық санының төмендеуі, табиғи өсім көрсеткіштерінің құлдырауы, көші-қонның теріс сальдосының күшеюі сияқты үрдістерді көрсетті. Алынған қорытындылар өңірдің демографиялық құрылымының өзгеруін, жас құрылымының ерекшеліктерін және әлеуметтік-экономикалық дамуға ықпалын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: демография, дағдарыс, Шығыс Қазақстан, халық саны, көші-қон, табиғи өсім

Алғыс. Бұл мақала Қазақстан Республикасы Білім және ғылым министрлігінің Ғылым комитетінің қаржыландыруымен «Шығыс Қазақстан: Семей және Өскемен қалаларының әлеуметтік-демографиялық және социомәдени трансформациясының траекториялары» ғылыми жобасын жүзеге асыру шеңберінде дайындалды (грант АР26198933).

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ДЕМОГРАФИЧЕСКИЕ ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ КРИЗИСА 1990-Х ГОДОВ В ВОСТОЧНОМ КАЗАХСТАНЕ

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются демографические последствия социально-экономического кризиса 1990-х годов в Восточном Казахстане. Данное историко-демографическое исследование является актуальным, так как способствует выявлению исторических причин и последствий современного демографического состояния. В работе использованы классические методы и подходы: историко-сравнительный, историко-статистический, периодизация и причинно-следственный анализ. Результаты исследования демонстрируют снижение численности населения, падение показателей естественного прироста и усиление отрицательного сальдо миграции. Полученные выводы отражают изменения демографической структуры региона, особенности возрастного состава и влияние на социально-экономическое развитие.

Ключевые слова: демография, кризис, Восточный Казахстан, численность населения, миграция, естественный прирост

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Introduction. At the end of the 20th century, the social, economic, and political transformations in the post-Soviet space had a significant impact on all spheres of society, including demographic development processes. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, followed by the crises of the 1990s, coincided with industrial decline, rising unemployment, a decrease in living standards, and the weakening of former social institutions. These factors led to a sharp change in the demographic situation in Kazakhstan, laying the foundation for a new historical phase in population size and structure. Studies in the post-Soviet space indicate that socio-economic instability and dissatisfaction with living conditions are key factors driving migration, which helps to explain the emigration trends observed in Kazakhstan during the 1990s (Lapshyna and Düvell, 2015: 291).

These processes were particularly pronounced in the East Kazakhstan region. During the Soviet period, the region had developed as a polyethnic area with high industrial potential; however, the transition to a market economy brought a range of socio-economic challenges. The contraction of industrial production, social instability, and changes in the labor market contributed to increased migration flows, declining birth rates, and rising mortality. As a result, the 1990s saw the emergence of region-specific characteristics of the demographic crisis in East Kazakhstan.

The relevance of this study is associated with the need to consider the demographic changes of the 1990s not merely as a temporary phenomenon, but as a significant historical factor that shaped the subsequent demographic development of the region. Understanding the roots of contemporary demographic trends requires a thorough analysis of their historical prerequisites. From this perspective, a historical examination of the demographic situation during the crisis years allows for identifying the cause-and-effect relationships underlying long-term changes in the population size and structure of East Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's regional development policies and strategies aimed at addressing spatial inequalities influenced demographic changes in the context of the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s, including migration patterns and population dynamics in East Kazakhstan (Turganbayev and Diener, 2018: 657). From the perspective of historical science, demographic processes are considered a historical phenomenon closely linked to the social, economic, and political development of society. Therefore, analyzing the demographic consequences of the 1990s crisis provides insights into the features of post-Soviet transformation at the regional level and helps to interpret the current demographic situation in its historical context. Accordingly, the study of the demographic impacts of the 1990s crisis in East Kazakhstan represents a relevant scientific issue aimed at a deeper understanding of the region's social history and identifying the historical patterns of demographic development.

Materials and Methods. The material basis of this study consists of scholarly works and their extensive analytical reviews dedicated to examining the demographic consequences of historical, political, economic, and social crises in Kazakhstan during the 1990s. In addition, the primary sources of demographic research include data from the National Statistics Bureau and the results of population censuses. Although archival records and historical-demographic documents have been utilized in some studies, most research relies on official statistics.

In the present study, academic articles from the international Scopus database concerning the history of Kazakhstan, post-Soviet transformation, migration, and population change were analyzed and their findings synthesized. For instance, studies published in the Scopus database provided a

comprehensive analysis of the impact of the economic downturn on migration dynamics during the 1990s, including data on external migration and changes in ethnic composition between 1991 and 2004, demonstrating a demographic decline within Kazakh society (Aldashev and Dietz, 2014: 379). Furthermore, an international study examining the relationship between economic shocks and migration analyzed migration trends between 1995 and 1999, highlighting the direct effect of economic factors on population movements (Charles et al., 2005: 107). Through these and other inter-institutional articles, the causes and patterns of demographic changes in the 1990s were analyzed from a multidimensional perspective

The study utilized state statistical indicators as well as population census data at both regional and national levels. These statistical sources, starting from the 1990s, enabled the analysis of population dynamics, natural growth, and external migration processes. A comparative analysis of official statistics and academic articles from the Scopus database provided scientific evidence for examining the historical causes and consequences of demographic trends.

Methodologically, the study employed a combination of historical-comparative, historical-statistical, cause-and-effect analysis, and regional approaches. The historical-comparative method allowed for comparing demographic indicators of the 1990s with subsequent periods using five-year intervals, while the historical-statistical method facilitated the analysis of population dynamics and migration flows based on quantitative data. The cause-and-effect analysis focused on the relationships between socio-economic factors of the crisis and demographic changes, and the regional approach emphasized the specific characteristics of East Kazakhstan. The combination of these materials and methods fully corresponds to the research objectives and provides a basis for a comprehensive historical analysis of the demographic consequences of the 1990s crisis.

Discussion. Demographic changes have a direct impact on socio-economic conditions and can contribute to regional trends such as crisis or growth. International experience indicates that migration is a key factor in global integration; however, its positive and negative effects are directly related to the quality of migration management, the political-economic context, and regional specificities during periods of crisis (Castles, 2014: 190).

The data obtained in this study demonstrate that the socio-economic crises of the 1990s had a multifaceted and long-term impact on demographic development in the East Kazakhstan region. During this period, demographic changes were not only a direct consequence of economic downturns but also closely linked to broader historical and political transformations. The collapse of the Soviet social system, changes in state governance structures, and the transition to market relations significantly influenced the population's strategies for livelihood in the region. During periods of economic crises, internal migration processes slowed down, and the impact of economic incentive factors on population mobility weakened (An et al., 2017: 1452).

The scientific foundation of demographic research in Kazakhstan originates from the Soviet period, relying on population censuses and ethnodemographic studies. Following independence, national demography emerged as a distinct field of study, with growing attention to ethnodemographic transformations, migration, urbanization, and issues of birth and mortality. Considering the works of both domestic and international scholars who have studied demographic processes, there is currently a substantial body of literature on urbanization, migration, and ethnodemographic changes, highlighting the relevance of the topic.

However, research on demographic development in Kazakhstan has often been limited to describing ethnodemographic changes, migration, and urbanization, primarily in a statistical-analytical manner. Consequently, the theoretical-methodological framework and the integration of these studies into international scientific discourse remain underdeveloped. In the scientific literature, the demographic crisis of the 1990s is frequently explained through intensified migration processes. According to scholars, during the post-Soviet economic crisis, migration flows increased, particularly among non-Kazakh ethnic groups, directly affecting the demographic structure of East Kazakhstan (Becker et al., 2003: 228). This evidence confirms the existence of regional specificities in migration within East Kazakhstan. The contraction of industrial production and the reduction of employment

opportunities led to a mass outflow of the working-age population from the region. This trend impacted not only the demographic structure but also contributed to the deformation of the population's age and social composition. Furthermore, the study identified a decline in natural population growth as one of the significant demographic consequences of the crisis. The sharp decrease in birth rates and the increase in mortality were closely associated with social instability, the deterioration of healthcare services, and the decline in living standards. This indicates that the demographic crisis was not only quantitative but also qualitative in nature.

A comparison of these findings with other regions shows that demographic changes in East Kazakhstan generally corresponded to national trends; however, the region's polyethnic composition and border location exerted a distinct influence on the pace and characteristics of demographic transformation. The mass emigration of certain ethnic groups led to the disruption of the ethnodemographic balance in the region, laying the foundation for structural changes that persisted in subsequent periods. Migration processes in the post-Soviet space were largely oriented toward the Russian Federation as a primary center of attraction, which helps explain the geographical direction of emigration flows from East Kazakhstan (Krasinet, 1998: 49).

International experience demonstrates that the nature of migration is directly influenced by political and economic structures (Valenta, 2017: 428), making this a crucial factor in explaining migration patterns in East Kazakhstan during the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s. Furthermore, demographic structure and ethnic composition may affect regional stability; however, the demographic changes in East Kazakhstan during the 1990s were directly shaped by specific economic and social contexts, limiting the applicability of simplistic political parallels. From this perspective, migration and population changes during the crisis period must be interpreted not only in the context of international trends but also in relation to regional socio-economic factors (Laruelle, 2018: 65).

Historically, the demographic crisis of the 1990s should not be seen as a temporary phenomenon characteristic of a transitional period in East Kazakhstan; rather, it must be considered a structural factor that determined the region's subsequent demographic development. The findings of this study highlight the importance of historical factors in understanding contemporary demographic trends and underscore the necessity of considering demography as an integral component of social history. Accordingly, a historical analysis of demographic changes in the 1990s can provide a comprehensive assessment of the region's socio-economic development and serve as an important scientific basis for interpreting contemporary demographic policies..

Results. The findings of the study indicate that the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s had a significant and long-lasting impact on the demographic development of the East Kazakhstan region. During this period, the region's demographic situation was characterized by a decline in population size, intensified migration flows, and a reduction in natural population growth.

Population size refers to the number of people residing in a given area at a specific point in time. Annual estimates at the beginning of the year are calculated based on the results of the most recent population census. According to this methodology, the number of births and permanent arrivals to the area is added, while the number of deaths and permanent departures is subtracted. Estimates for previous years are subsequently adjusted based on the results of subsequent censuses (stat.gov.kz, 2025).

First, regarding population dynamics, the results indicate that a sustained demographic decline began in East Kazakhstan from the early 1990s. The population decrease was primarily associated with negative net migration both internal and external as well as a sharp decline in natural population growth. This demographic contraction was particularly pronounced in comparison with other regions of the Republic. Long-term demographic trends reveal that the structural characteristics of Kazakhstan's population were noticeably affected by the crisis period of 1990–2000. The collapse of the Soviet system, coupled with socio-economic transformations, negative migration balances, and declining birth rates, led to a reduction in population size and changes in age structure. These processes were especially evident in East Kazakhstan, where the 1990s were marked by population decline, decreased natural growth, and an accelerating aging trend.

The demographic crisis of the 1990s had long-term consequences, affecting the age structure established in subsequent decades. This is particularly evident in the gradual decline of the youth population and the increasing share of elderly residents. The inertial nature of these trends persists into the present period. Comparatively, official statistical data from the 2020s indicate a numerical recovery of Kazakhstan's population: according to 2024 data, the country's population exceeded 20 million, with individuals under 25 years old accounting for 42.6%, those aged 25–65 comprising 48.5%, and residents over 65 representing 8.9%.

However, this overall positive dynamic is not uniform at the regional level. In East Kazakhstan, the demographic structure established during the 1990s continues to manifest in an aging population and a relatively lower proportion of youth. Furthermore, life expectancy gradually recovered only after the decline observed during the crisis period: in the post-pandemic period, life expectancy was 70.23 years in 2021 and increased to 75.09 years by 2023. This trend, coupled with population aging, contributes to an increased social burden at the regional level. The aging population and the decreasing number of working-age individuals particularly in East Kazakhstan, where negative migration and low natural growth persist place significant pressure on the state pension system (enpf.kz, 2024).

The results concerning migration processes indicate that emigration flows predominated in East Kazakhstan. Economic instability, the closure of industrial enterprises, and the deterioration of social conditions prompted a mass outflow of working-age residents from the region. In particular, the acceleration of external migration in the mid-1990s had a significant impact on the region's demographic structure. The study also demonstrates that internal migration was an important factor in the spatial redistribution of the national population. Its intensity and structure were shaped by historical events and state policies, determining the direction of regional demographic processes. The data further confirm that internal migration is closely linked to age structure, spatial patterns, and urbanization processes. Notably, during periods of socio-economic crisis, internal migration emerged as a sensitive indicator of demographic change, exerting a significant influence on the dynamics of regional population (Charles-Edwards, 2019: 150).

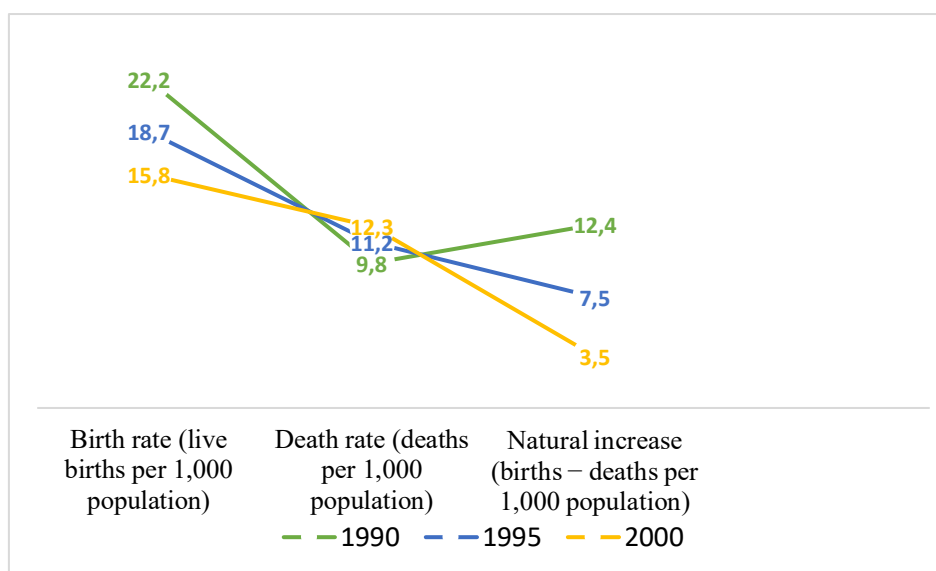
The study results indicate that migration significantly influences regional demographic changes (Hugo, 2013: 141). In the case of East Kazakhstan, this trend was particularly pronounced during the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s. Moreover, the positive effects of migration were directly dependent on the quality of migration management and the effectiveness of state policies, influencing both the structure and movement of the regional population. These findings clearly demonstrate the role of migration as a sensitive indicator of demographic change. However, in addition to birth and death rates, which directly determine population growth, international migration also represents a significant factor. Evaluating migration data is challenging, as many individuals simultaneously reside outside their home country as tourists, workers, or refugees, making it difficult to collect precise information (indexmundi.com, 2025).

Analysis of natural population growth indicators revealed a decline in birth rates and an increase in mortality. Between 1990 and 2000, birth and death rates in Kazakhstan, including East Kazakhstan, changed significantly. At the national level, the birth rate exhibited a steady downward trend: in 1990, approximately 22.2 live births per 1,000 inhabitants were registered; by 1995, this decreased to approximately 18.7, and by 2000, to around 15.8, indicating a decline in fertility over the decade (macrotrends.net, 2025). This process was closely associated with the weakening of the social protection system, deterioration in the quality of healthcare services, and declining living standards. As a result, the natural foundations of population growth in East Kazakhstan weakened. The majority of deaths were caused by circulatory system diseases, followed by disorders of the nervous system (sputnik.kz, 2025).

Studies indicate that the decline in birth rates during the 1990s was influenced by the socio-economic crisis in the country, which led to delayed childbearing among women, a slowdown in family formation, and the temporary outflow and subsequent return of the working-age population. Although regional-level official data for East Kazakhstan are not fully published, the overall decline in births across Kazakhstan clearly affected the demographic dynamics of the region. In addition, elevated mortality rates – or those that initially declined in the early 1990s before stabilizing also contributed to the negative trajectory of natural population growth, as the number of births decreased significantly relative to the

number of deaths. Demographic studies show that between 1990 and 1999, the difference between births and deaths i.e., natural increase declined substantially and, in some periods, approached negative values, reflecting the consequences of socio-economic instability and challenges in the healthcare system (unfpa.org, 2025). Overall, the negative trends in birth and death rates between 1990 and 2000 were closely associated with factors such as the socio-economic crisis, migration of working-age residents, and reduced demographic activity in the region, directly affecting the natural population growth in East Kazakhstan (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Birth and death rates in East Kazakhstan for 1990–2000 (Note: indicators are based on national data for the Republic of Kazakhstan and interpolated for the East Kazakhstan region)



The data obtained in the study indicate that demographic changes in the 1990s also affected the age structure of the population in East Kazakhstan. While the overall population decline reflected the national trend, regional factors intensified these demographic shifts. In particular, the migration of working-age youth to major cities in search of employment and the return of other ethnic groups to their historical homelands significantly contributed to the decrease in natural population growth. As a result, the population of East Kazakhstan experienced a notable reduction. The decline in the working-age population and the lower proportion of youth had long-term implications for the region’s socio-economic development, creating a foundation for labor shortages in subsequent periods.

An analysis of urbanization and internal migration dynamics shows a sharp increase in the share of urban residents across the country, accompanied by a consistent decrease in the rural population. In terms of international migration, Kazakhstan experienced a bilateral migration process over the last two decades. During the 1990s, the share of ethnic Russians and Germans leaving the country decreased, while their place was gradually taken by ethnic Kazakhs returning from abroad (Oralmans). The specific comparative dynamics of each ethnic group can be observed in Table 1. Due to the lack of precise quantitative data on the ethnic composition of East Kazakhstan, comparative analysis relies on official historical censuses and research data. For instance, individual census data for 1990 are unavailable, so the 1989 census results are considered approximate for that year. Similarly, the 2000 official census data, based on the 1999 census, are used as the closest representation of the ethnodemographic situation.

Table 1 – Comparative indicators of the ethnic composition of East Kazakhstan (based on the results of the 1989 and 1999 national censuses)

| Ethnic groups | 1989 (individuals) | % | 1999 (individuals) | % |
|---------------|--------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|
| Kazakhs | 687,879 | 38,92 | 743,098 | 48,54 |
| Russians | 914,424 | 51,74 | 694,705 | 45,38 |
| Tatars | 27,982 | 1,58 | 24,506 | 1,60 |

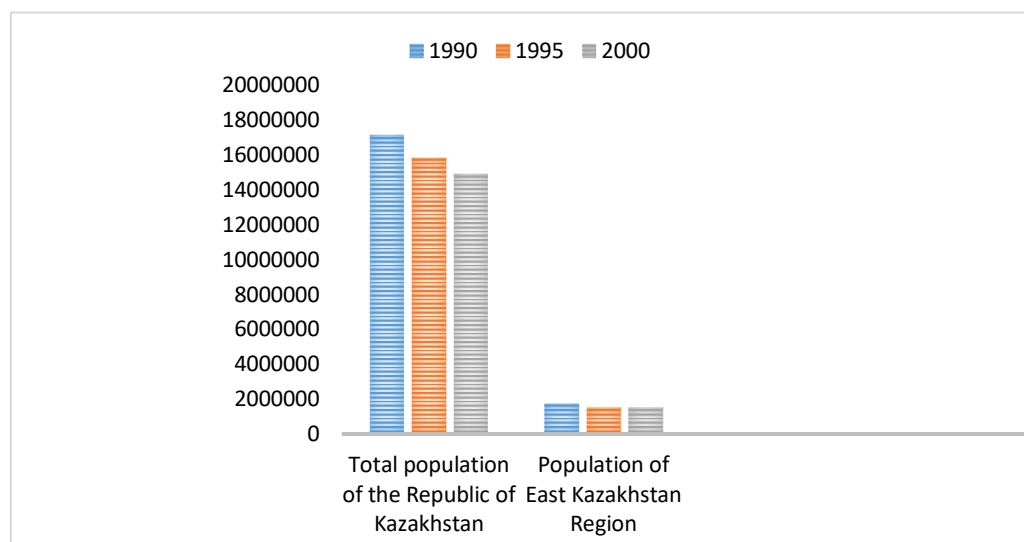
| | | | | |
|---|----------|------|----------|------|
| Germans | 66,924 | 3,79 | 32,141 | 2,10 |
| Ukrainians | 35,702 | 2,02 | 15,969 | 1,04 |
| Others (Azerbaijanis, Chechens, Uzbeks, etc.) | ≈ 4,000+ | ≈ 2 | ≈ 3,000+ | ≈ 2 |

In the first quarter of the 21st century, labor migration in Kazakhstan acquired a new character, as the country simultaneously attracted labor and sent skilled specialists abroad. This phenomenon affected the internal labor market, regional balance, and social structure. The urbanization process, particularly in large cities such as Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent, has formed a new structure of demographic space. East Kazakhstan Region was no exception to this trend. Currently, the region is experiencing a sharp decline in the number of young people and an increase in the proportion of elderly residents. Thus, the demographic situation in East Kazakhstan demonstrates a pronounced aging trend. According to the 2023 Biletter Index, the region’s index value is -27.8 , indicating that the population under 15 years old is smaller than that over 50 years old. This indicator classifies the region as an “aging” area and reflects an imbalance in the demographic structure (Urmanov, 2023).

Moreover, the regional migration situation also contributes to demographic pressure. In the past year, 2,000 people left East Kazakhstan, which corresponds to approximately one-tenth of the region’s population over the last decade. Such persistent negative migration affects the stability of rural settlements and population numbers, disrupts the demographic structure, and may lead to the near depopulation of certain districts. These data demonstrate the long-term effects of the socio-economic crisis and migration processes of the 1990s, as well as clearly illustrate the specific characteristics of the region’s age structure.

Overall, the research findings indicate that the crisis of the 1990s altered the historical trajectory of demographic development in East Kazakhstan and generated structural changes that laid the foundation for the region’s current demographic situation. Nevertheless, the population of Kazakhstan demonstrated resilience in overcoming the consequences of the 1990s crisis. During this period, women delayed childbirth due to uncertainty, and a portion of the population particularly Slavs and Germans emigrated from the country in large numbers. Despite these challenges, by 2001, the total population of Kazakhstan amounted to only 14.8 million people (Urmanov, 2023). These data clearly illustrate both the severity of the demographic crisis in the region and the population’s capacity for endurance.

Figure 2 – Population Changes in 1990–2000 (Republic of Kazakhstan and East Kazakhstan Region)



This figure clearly illustrates the severity of the demographic crisis: from a high level in 1990, the population declined by approximately 1.2–1.3 million people by 2000. At the national level, several sources confirm the population figures for 1990 (danso.info). The discrepancy between sources arises from differences between the official census results and subsequently adjusted or

extrapolated estimates. Minor variations between the recorded population during the census and the projected estimates may occur. According to some data, while the population of the Republic exceeded 16.4 million according to the 1989 census, it decreased to 14.9 million according to the 1999 census (Musyrman, 2023). Therefore, around 1990, based on the 1989 census results, the population of East Kazakhstan was approximately 1.767 million. Although the 1995 regional population figures are not officially available, interpolation within the 1989–1999 data cycle suggests that it was around 1.53 million. According to the official estimate for 2000, the population of the region amounted to 1.516 million. This indicates a regional demographic decline alongside the overall national trend of population decrease (wikipedia.org).

Conclusion. The study results demonstrated that the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s had a significant impact on the demographic development of East Kazakhstan. During this period, population decline, the sharp drop in natural growth rates, and the increase in negative migration balances left long-term effects on the region's demographic structure. Specifically:

- The population dynamics decreased in line with the general national trend, while regional characteristics particularly the emigration of the working-age population intensified demographic changes.

- Birth and death rates shifted negatively during the crisis, leading to a decrease in natural population growth. This was a consequence of socio-economic instability, declining quality of medical services, and deterioration in living standards.

- Migration contributed to changes in the region's ethnodemographic structure and the reduction of youth and working-age groups, which had long-term implications for the socio-economic development of the region.

The historical-comparative, historical-statistical, causal, and regional methods employed in the study allowed for the integration of historical and quantitative data, facilitating an understanding of the structural nature of the 1990s demographic crisis. Furthermore, the analysis of research from Scopus and other scientific sources strengthened the study's scientific validity.

In conclusion, the 1990s crisis acted as a structural factor that altered the historical trajectory of demographic development in East Kazakhstan and laid the foundation for the current demographic situation. These findings underscore the importance of considering historical context in planning regional demographic policies and improving the socio-economic conditions of the population.

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