

INTERNATIONAL

Spain

Exodus to cities creates rural ghost towns

One huge region rivals Arctic Lapland as least populated zone in Europe

TOBIAS BUCK — MOTOS

People have been leaving the village of Motos in Spain for as long as Matías López can remember. Five years ago, there were still 10 inhabitants. Two years ago, his last neighbour died. Now the local cemetery is almost full, with just two grave sites left unoccupied.

But the surrounding houses and farms, the ancient stone church and the village playground all stand empty.

Mr López alone has held out, together with his 400-strong flock of sheep and a pack of scruffy dogs. “You get used to the loneliness,” says Mr López, 76, as he watches his sheep graze on the meadow above Motos. Besides, he adds, “there is nothing better than a man alone who can live with himself”.

Such endurance, however, is becoming increasingly rare. All around his village 200km east of Madrid, in Spanish inland provinces such as Teruel, Guadalajara and Soria, villages are gradually being abandoned. A process of depopulation and rural flight that has lasted more than five decades is drawing to its seemingly inevitable conclusion.

What is left behind is a region twice the size of Belgium but so devoid of people that it rivals the Arctic provinces of Lapland as the least populated zone in Europe. For every square kilometre, there are fewer than eight inhabitants.

“The problem is not just the extreme depopulation,” says Francisco Burillo, a history professor at the University of Zaragoza and a local campaigner. “This is the most disjointed region in all of Spain, and the entire European Union.”

He points out that the area of concern, the so-called Celtiberian highlands, spans five autonomous Spanish regions and nine provinces. That makes it difficult to formulate a coherent policy.

Reversing the population slide is made harder still by the absence of cities, and the unusually large number of tiny villages. The vast territory is home to just four cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants but includes more than 600 villages with less than 100 residents. Many are poorly connected by road and are hours from the nearest rail station.

“If we don’t change the trend, we will have the biggest population desert in the European Union,” says Prof Burillo,



Matías López, the last inhabitant of Motos, leads out his flock to graze on the deserted hills. ‘You get used to the loneliness,’ he says — Alfredo Caliz

warning that the worst-affected areas are already “biologically dead”. The average male age in the Montes Universales, the remote region surrounding Motos, is 57. In many villages in this area on the border of Aragón and Castile-La Mancha, children are a rarity.

The fate of the Celtiberian highlands is mirrored in other thinly populated regions such as Galicia and Aragón. But it is also emblematic of broader demographic trends afflicting Spain. Thanks to strong economic growth and an

unprecedented housing boom, the country became a magnet for migrant workers from Latin America, eastern Europe and north Africa in the years leading up to the financial crisis. The population soared from 40m in 1999 to 47m in 2010, one of the most dramatic demographic transformations in recent European history.

Now, however, that trend has gone into reverse. With unemployment still stuck at more than 23 per cent, hundreds of thousands are leaving the country every year.

Coupled with Spain’s low birth rate, this shift means that Spain is shedding residents at an alarming pace. According to the national statistics office, the country will lose more than 1m inhabitants over the next 15 years.

For Spain that decline may be manageable. But in the remote villages of Teruel and Guadalajara even losing a few dozen residents can spell disaster.

Jesús Alba is the mayor of Checa, a pretty mountain village half an hour’s drive from Motos. Over the past four years alone, he says, the village has lost

one in 10 residents, and now numbers just 300 inhabitants.

“Checa is at the limit,” says Mr Alba. “Right now we still have a medical centre. We have a bank. We have a restaurant and a couple of bars. But if we lose more inhabitants we won’t be able to hold on to those services.”

Keeping the local school is crucial, says Juan Vicente Aparicio, the mayor of nearby Orihuela del Tremedal.

“The moment when there are not enough children to keep the school going, that is when you know that the village is finished. People don’t move to places where there is no school,” he says.

Orihuela’s school is housed in an expansive building far too large for its 38 pupils. The school in Checa is smaller still, with just 25 children.

Mr Alba admits there is no easy way to halt the slide. He travels to Madrid frequently to raise the plight of his region with senior politicians. More investment and better incentives for businesses to relocate would help, he says.

Mr Alba also hopes to establish a regional quality brand to improve the marketing of the meat, grain, potatoes and other goods produced in the region.

The abundant forest could easily support a factory to produce wood pellets, he argues.

Yet for all the activism, there is no sense yet that a turnaround is at hand.

“When I go to Madrid to speak with the high-ups, I always ask them the same thing: ‘Do you actually want people to live in the countryside? Or do you want us all to live in the city?’”

