

# RECENT MARRIAGE AND CHILDBEARING TRENDS IN CROATIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Although many former socialist countries in Europe have experienced numerous negative demographic changes, particularly since the early 1990s, demographic development of Croatia has been specific, especially due to long-term emigration, which was later accompanied by below-replacement fertility level and falling birth rates. In the last three decades, decreasing number of births and falling birth rates have been the crucial determinants of demographic development in Croatia. At the beginning of each year, upon the publication of vital statistics for the previous year, the newspapers publish articles pointing out the "demographic catastrophe" referring to the decreasing number of births and marriages, low total fertility rate and increasing age of the mother at first birth. However, that issue was not addressed enough in Croatian scientific literature. Most of the existing researches were focused on natural change in general (e. g. Nejašmić 1986, 2000; Klempić and Lajić 2005), and one paper dealt with extramarital births in Croatia (Mrđen 1997). There is only one relatively recent paper dealing with regional characteristics of birth rates in Croatia in the period 2001-2003 (Nejašmić, Bašić and Toskić 2008). Despite the fact that Croatia has had below-replacement total fertility rate since late 1960s, that issue has been investigated more thoroughly only recently, particularly the relation between women's employment and fertility (e. g. Akrap 2011, 2013, 2014; Akrap and Čipin 2011a, 2011b; Čipin 2010, 2011).

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of childbearing trends in Croatia since the mid-1980s through the analysis of number of births, birth rates, extramarital births, total fertility rates, marriage patterns, and mean age of the mother at first childbirth. Namely, in early 1980s, Croatia entered the post-transitional stage of demographic transition and since early 1990s it has been characterised by constant natural decrease, which, coupled with intensive emigration, led to depopulation. The observed demographic changes should be analysed through the prism of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), which refers to the changes in family formation and fertility. The analyses in this paper were carried out on the basis of the official data published by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics for the period from 1985 to 2017.

## **CHANGES IN REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR AND MARRIAGE PATTERNS**

The recent changes in reproductive behaviour and marriage patterns in Croatia can be analysed through the prism of the Second Demographic Transition theory. The basic idea of the SDT is that industrialised countries have reached a new stage in their demographic development, which is characterised by the extensive control over fertility. Namely, the couples tend to have one or two children, the fertility levels declined below the replacement level, and the childbearing is being postponed (Van de Kaa 2002). Lesthaege (2007) argues that the SDT also brings a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage and the disconnection between marriage and procreation. In Croatian case, the extensive control over fertility, low fertility levels and postponed childbearing have been present for several decades, but there is still a significant connection between marriage and procreation.

**Live births and birth rate** – During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the number of live births in Croatia decreased constantly, and in the first half of the century it reduced by 20.9 per cent (from almost 121,000 to 95,500). Furthermore, in the second half the decrease was much more striking (-54.2 per cent; from approximately 95,500 to less than 44,000 live births per year), particularly if we take into consideration the fact that Croatia had approximately 650,000 more inhabitants at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In early 1930s, Croatia entered the late transitional phase with birth rates falling below 30.0 per thousand, while in mid-1980s the rates fell below 14.0 per thousand. In early 1990s, the unfavourable trend continued and the number of live births fell below 50,000 per year, which was partly caused by the Homeland War. After the war, in 1996 and 1997, a small-scale baby boom was recorded and the number live births was somewhat higher than the number of deaths, but in the following years the previously recorded negative trends continued.

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was marked by unprecedentedly low number of births of approximately 40,000, and that number continued to lower each year. The lowest number of births was recorded in 2017 (36,566). In the period analysed in this paper (1985–2017) the number of live births decreased by almost 42,0 per cent. Consequently, the birth rates in Croatia have been below 10.0 per thousand since the beginning of 2000s, ranking Croatia among the European countries with the lowest birth rate.

Another fact observed in this period is intensive emigration from Croatia. Namely, since 2009 and the offset of the economic crisis, the number of emigrants from Croatia increased in comparison to the previous period, and net migration turned from positive to negative. According to the data provided by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, in the period from 2009 to

the end of 2017, as much as 195,000 persons emigrated from Croatia, and 62 per cent of them were aged 15-49. Despite the fact that 65.4 per cent of the immigrants in the same period were of the same age, the country still lost almost 61,000 people of that age due to negative net migration. Additionally, in all the age groups (15-49) the net migration was negative. Along with the declining number of live births each year, this clearly shows that the reproductive potential of Croatian population has reduced significantly.

**Fertility** – For over four decades, the Croatian population has not had generation replacement, with TFR below 2.1 and net reproduction rate below 1.0. The last time the TFR was above the replacement level was in 1960s. After that, it continued declining until early 1990, after which, in mid-1990s, it increased slightly due to a small-scale baby boom. The historically low levels of TFR were recorded in early 2000s, and after that it stabilised at the level of approximately 1.42, which is below the average rate in the EU. Nevertheless, the TFR is not as low as in many other south and central European countries.

Decrease of TFR from 1.82 in 1985 to 1.42 in 2017 was primarily the result of reduction of the number of women aged 15-49 and delayed childbearing. This downward trend had two distinctive periods – the baby boom period (1996 and 1997) when the TFR increased just above 1.65, and early 2000s (2002 and 2003, in particular) when it reached the lowest level (below 1.35) due to the lowest number of live births. From the 1981 population census to 2011, the total number of women in Croatia decreased by 6.6 per cent, while the number of women at childbearing age (15-49) decreased by 15.6 per cent. Also, the age of a mother at first birth increased by over four years.

Another notable trend was the decrease of general fertility rate (GFR). At the beginning of the analysed period, there were almost 55 live births per 1,000 women aged 15-49, and now that ratio is approximately 41 live births. As it was the case with the number of live births, there were two distinct periods – increase of GFR in the period after the Homeland War due to the baby boom, and the period of lowest GFR at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to the reduced number of live births. The decrease of GFR since 1985 has been closely related to reduced number of women at childbearing age, as well as with the changes in age specific fertility rates. Namely, in 1985, the highest fertility rates were recorded in the 20-24 age group (149.1 children per 1,000 women). In the following decades, two prominent trends could be observed – decrease of fertility in the age groups 15-29 and increase in the age groups 30-39. Additionally, women aged 25-29 replaced 20-to-24-year-olds as the peak childbearing age group, and the latest data indicate that 30-to-34-year-old mothers have become the most numerous. In the

period from 1985 to 2017, the most notable decrease of age-specific fertility rate was recorded in the age group 20-24 – from 149.1 to 40,6 children per 1,000 women.

**Marriage patterns and delayed childbearing** – Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marriage has traditionally been a dominant form of union between a man and a woman in Croatia. Even today, in, early 21<sup>st</sup> century, marriage<sup>5</sup> dominates over extramarital unions. However, in the period analysed in this paper, a downward trend in the number of marriages was observed. In 1985, as much as 30,953 marriages were concluded, while in 2017, that number reduced to 20,310. The first significant fall of the number of marriages was in 1991, when the Homeland War started, but interestingly, it was still higher than it would be in 2017. The above-mentioned trend was closely related to the simultaneous trend of delaying marriage and increasingly practised cohabitation and extramarital union, which frequently precede marriage. Accordingly, the crude marriage rate reduced from 6.6 per thousand inhabitants in 1985 to 4.9 in 2017. Another interesting fact is that in the long period from 1992 to 2008 the crude marriage rate was stable, but after that, it started decreasing. Although, there are no definite explanations for this reduction, it could be linked to negative consequences of the economic recession, particularly to the increased unemployment (especially among the young adults) and general economic uncertainty, which prompted people to delay marriage.

On the other hand, divorce rate in Croatia has been stable throughout the analysed period, ranging between 0.8 and 1.4 per thousand, which ranks Croatia among the EU countries with the lowest divorce rate. However, it can be observed after 2010 the divorce rate has been increasing. Consequently, due to a notable decrease of the number of marriages and a small increase in the number of divorces, the divorce to marriage ratio has been increasing for the last several years.

In most cases, childbearing was traditionally associated with marriage, and extramarital births comprised only a small portion of total live births. According to the church and other historical records in Europe, from 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, the non-marital childbearing ("illegitimacy ratio") ranged from approximately 2 to 7 percent in most countries (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; after Laslett, Oosterveen, and Smith 1980). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marriage was a dominant form of union between a man and a woman, and 1960s and 1970s were the "golden age of marriage" across many Western nations (Kiernan 2001) and in Croatia as well (Mrđen 1997). In Croatia, the percentage of extramarital births was the lowest in 1970s, and has been gradually increasing since then. In 1985, there were 5.9 extramarital births per thousand live births, which ranked Croatia among the European countries with the lowest

extramarital birth rates. More rapid increase of births outside marriage started in late 1990s, and the highest rate was recorded in 2017 (19.9 per thousand live births). The recorded trend indicates that the link between marriage and childbearing has weakened, but is still very strong in comparison to most of the European countries.

As the previous data indicate, there was, and still is, a strong connection between marriage and childbearing in Croatia. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the average age of women at first marriage and at first childbirth. The both indicators recorded a constant increase since mid-1980s, when the average age at first marriage was 22.8 years and at first birth 23.9. In the following years, along with the increase of both ages, the gap between them narrowed. After the Homeland War the average ages almost equalled, and according to the latest data, the average age of women at first marriage was 28.6 years and at first birth 28.9. The presented data show that from 1986 to 2017 the average age of women at first marriage increased by 5.8 years, and at first birth by 5.0 years. Since the marriage is still considered an important type of union in Croatia, especially for raising children, very frequently people decide to get married after upon learning about the pregnancy, but before the baby is born.

If we analyse the age of the mothers at childbirth in the period from 1987 to 2017, we can notice two divergent trends – significant decrease in the percentage of babies born to mothers aged 20–24 (from 39.1 to 13,1 per cent) and simultaneous increase of those born to mothers aged 30–34 (from 14.5 to 34.1 per cent), which clearly indicate the shift of childbearing to early 30s. On the other hand, the percentage of babies born to mothers aged 25–29 did not change significantly, but in early 1990s, they became the most numerous group. However, in 2013, for the first time, most of the babies were born to mothers aged 30–34. Another notable trend was the continuous increase of the percentage of babies born to mothers aged 35–39, which was in 2017, only five percentage points higher than of babies born to mothers aged 20–24. Births to mothers aged 15–19 decreased in the analysed period from 8.9 to 2,7 per cent, which shows that births to teenage mothers make only a very small proportion of total births, even lower than the births given by mothers aged 40–45.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Besides long-term emigration of fertile cohorts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and wars, among the most notable reasons for the significant fall in the number of live births and birth rates in Croatia were definitely intensive industrialisation and urbanisation, which influenced the reproductive behaviour of the population. Namely, the period from early 1960s to early 1980s in Croatia was characterised by intensive industrialisation, during which there was an increased

demand for labour force, particularly in labour-intensive industries. Such demand prompted a significant emigration from rural to urban areas and the increase of women labour force. Additionally, women's educational and career aspirations increased. The researches have shown that prolonged education contributes to postponing the childbearing (Liefbroer and Corijn 1999; Baizan et al. 2003; Lappegard and Ronsen 2005). The same trend can be observed in Croatia, too. Namely, from academic year 1980/1981 to 2016/2017, the number of women enrolled at higher education institutions increased by 183.5 per cent, while the number of men increased by 111.1 per cent. Consequently, as much as 56.7 per cent of enrolled students in 2016/2017 were women (Women and Men in Croatia 2018). Simultaneously, the birth rates and fertility decreased significantly. Active participation in labour force also contributed to delaying marriage and childbearing. Additionally, due to economic insecurity in post-socialist and transitional economies, such as Croatia, there was a strong need for investing in one's own education and career thus postponing marriage and pregnancy (Čipin, 2011).

Although there is no unanimous scientific evidence that links declining fertility and reduced number of live births with the periods of economic recession (Lanzieri 2013), there is evident decline in the number of live births in Croatia since the beginning of the economic recession in 2009, and similar trends were observed in a number of other European countries (Goldstein et al. 2013). The changes in reproductive behaviour in that period have been prompted by increased unemployment of young adults and economic uncertainty. For the same reason, young people tend to postpone marriage. However, it is also important to emphasise the negative effects of emigration from Croatia, which has intensified since the beginning of the crisis, particularly because most of the emigrants have been young adults in their reproductive age.

In conclusion, we can say that Croatia has been faced with, as Lanzieri (2013) calls it, baby recession. Although the number of births and fertility rates have been declining since the mid-1980s, they have recently reached the unprecedented levels. The situation regarding childbearing has been alarming for the past 25 years, and despite the National Population Policy, adopted in 2006, little has been done. Additionally, the state failed to mitigate the negative impact of economic conditions on fertility by introducing family policies that might have softened the adverse effects of the crisis.