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## **Dynamic and Structural-Demographic Characteristics of the Population of Croatia in the Period 1953-2021<sup>4</sup>**

The basis of every demographic analysis, i.e. the research of dynamic and structural-demographic features, trends, phenomena, relations and processes in a specific time (inter-census) period and in a particular area (country, region, settlement), is empirical statistical data collected using different techniques and methods, among which, throughout history, population censuses have been particularly important. These are highly extensive statistical operations, which are designed to gather various data on the population, households, apartments and farms. The principles and criteria of modern population censuses (completeness, periodicity, reference moment of the census, definitions of the total population, definitions of individual categories of the population, etc.) were established in the middle of the 19th century and, with minor modifications, are still applied today. In recent times, “classic” population censuses, that is, enumeration in the “field”, are increasingly giving way to new techniques and methods of collecting data on the population (population size and its structural characteristics). In this context, online enumeration (“self-enumeration”) and registration lists are increasingly important. Accordingly, census methodologies have been adapted, resulting in each population

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census employing its own methodology, which causes inconsistencies that prevent direct comparison of all collected data. Considering the devastating demographic development of Croatia and the available census data, this paper will show the average age of the population of Croatia from 1953-2021, the aging index and age coefficients in the period from 1953-2021, population by nationality 1971-2021, population by religion 2001 -2021, population according to mother tongue 1991-2021 and population of Croatia according to highest completed school and gender from 1961-2021.

**Ključne riječi:** census data, Croatia, demography, migration, population.

## 1. Introduction

Population movement is an activity related to the natural and mechanical dynamics of the population. Natural population movement includes all movements that are the result of birth (birth rate) fertility and death (mortality). The mechanical dynamics of the population includes population migrations, i. e. immigration and emigration from one country to another or within one country, city, settlement, etc. Both immigration and emigration can affect the overall movement of the population (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999).

Natural movement can have a positive or negative effect on the overall movement of the population, meaning that if the birth rate is higher than mortality, then the natural movement positively effect on the overall movement of the population, and vice versa. Mechanical movement can also have a positive or negative effect on the overall movement of the population, meaning that if the number of immigrants is greater than the number of emigrants, the mechanical movement positively affects the overall movement of the population, and vice versa.

The overall movement of the population also depends on numerous factors related to birth and mortality: age-sex structure (biological structure of the population), economic factors, cultural-educational factors, and psychological influences (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999).

Emigration has been a centuries-old process in the Republic of Croatia. One of the more complex global processes and problems in the world is population migration, which has a huge impact on societies and states.

When observing the spatial movement of the population, it is essential to identify the cause of migration. The causes of emigration are usually varied and can be identified through a few independent factors. Many authors tried to group the causes of population migration and, under the influence of liberal theory, the classic concept of a push-pull model was based on push and pull factors of

certain regions (Lee, 1966). The push-pull model is applicable for the most part in microanalysis, at the level of investigating the motives and/or reasons for an individual's movement.

Among the causes of emigration, we can classify some socioeconomic factors such as the degree of social and economic development, level of employment, social pressure, breakdown of social forms, while on an individual level there are personal causes: dissatisfaction, aspirations, possibility of advancement, desire for new business and life challenges, etc.

Even today, population migration is continually increasing due to the present "push" and "pull" factors, the wider context of social and political changes that affect emigration, and simultaneously affect their origin.

The paper will analyse the dynamic and structural-demographic characteristics of the population of Croatia in the period 1953-2021, highlighting how during the seventy-year period in Croatia, more serious and worrisome distorted population structures were caused by the long-term and constant emigration of the young population in the fertile age, as well as by the low natural increase of the population.

On the other hand, there has been no significant return of Croats to their homeland.

The paper is structured and written according to rules and methodology which include a combination of classic and modern demography. Classical demography is reflected in the paper through statistical data and mathematical calculations, while modern demography is evident through the visualization and clear presentation of graphs and pictures in the paper. The method of induction was used to draw general conclusions based on individual observations, and an analytical method was also used in differentiating established claims in demography.

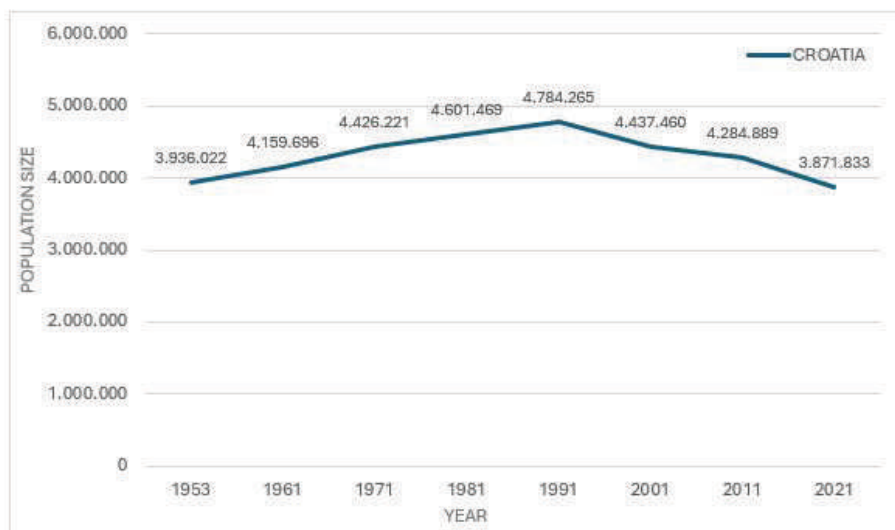
## **2. Inter-Census Movement of the Population 1953-2021 (Natural and Mechanical Movement of the Population - Migration)**

The question of demographic development - the development of the population - is one of the fundamental problems facing the global community today. The change in the number and composition - structure - of the population appears as an indicator of the totality and diversity of social and economic development, but also as an important factor in its (lack of) progress. Knowing the basic characteristics of demographic trends is essential for understanding the current state of the world's population, but also for predicting future processes of small societies (like the Croatian one) as well as the relationships within them.

Many Croatian demographers have written extensively on population decline in their works (Akrap (2019), Mesarić Žabčić (2019; 2020), Pokos (2018; 2020; 2021; 2022), Živić (2024) (2022), Turk (2021), Šimunić (2018)) explaining and analyzing the causes and consequences of population loss in Croatia. How dramatic the situation is shown in Figure 1, which shows that the number of inhabitants is in constant and continuous decline from the population census in 1991 to the last population census in 2021. Given that we see that Croatia is continuously losing more and more inhabitants in each new population census whether by natural or mechanical movement of the population, it can be said with certainty that many structures of the population have already been damaged, as well as some necessary systems needed for the functioning of the existing society, such as the pension system, the health system, and in the future, according to demographers' estimates, the viability of the education system will also be called into question.

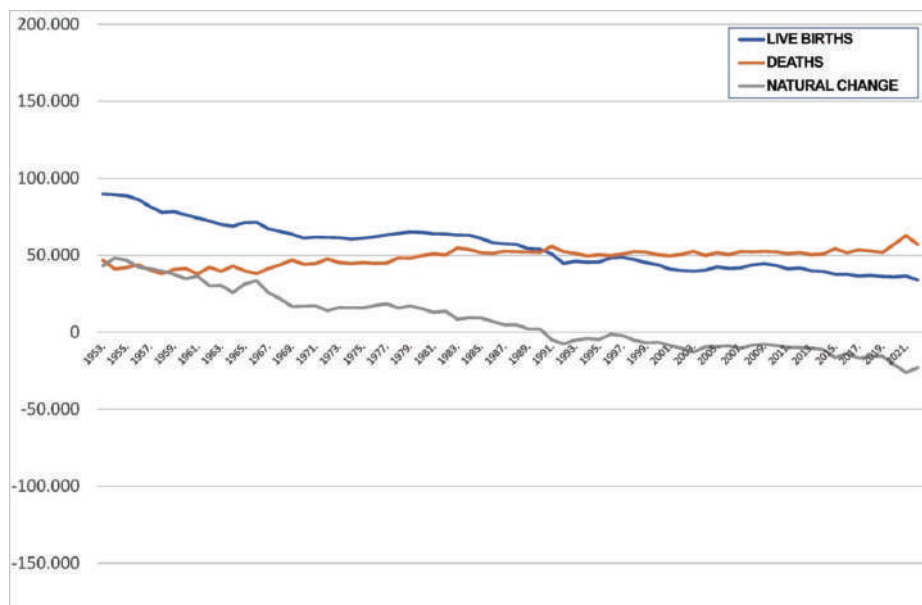
The largest decline (Figure 1) is visible in the 1991-2001 period, due to the Homeland War, when Croatia lost its population through migration and loss on the battlefield, and in the 2011-2021 period, when the Republic of Croatia entered the EU, and after the entry into the EU and the opening and availability of the European of the labour market, the constant emigration of the younger population of fertile age, which should be the bearers of the youth of the population and Croatian society, has occurred and continues. It is also important and necessary to mention that the change in census methodology also caused the decline.

The problems of demographic development in the world are becoming more and more complex, unfortunately, and more difficult, and therefore attract more and more attention, not only from academic and scientific circles, but also from the wider public. In addition to the features of the population movement (total, natural, migratory) as a fundamental demographic indicator, in recent times, population scientists pay special attention to the analysis of structural-demographic features, processes and trends in population dynamics, because they are in a direct cause-and-effect relationship with any socio-economic development in an area. Population today is a factor, but also a consequence of the overall social, political, and economic development of an area, and ultimately of the entire world.



### 1. Inter-census population change 1953-2021

Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>



### 2. Natural population change 1953-2021

Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>

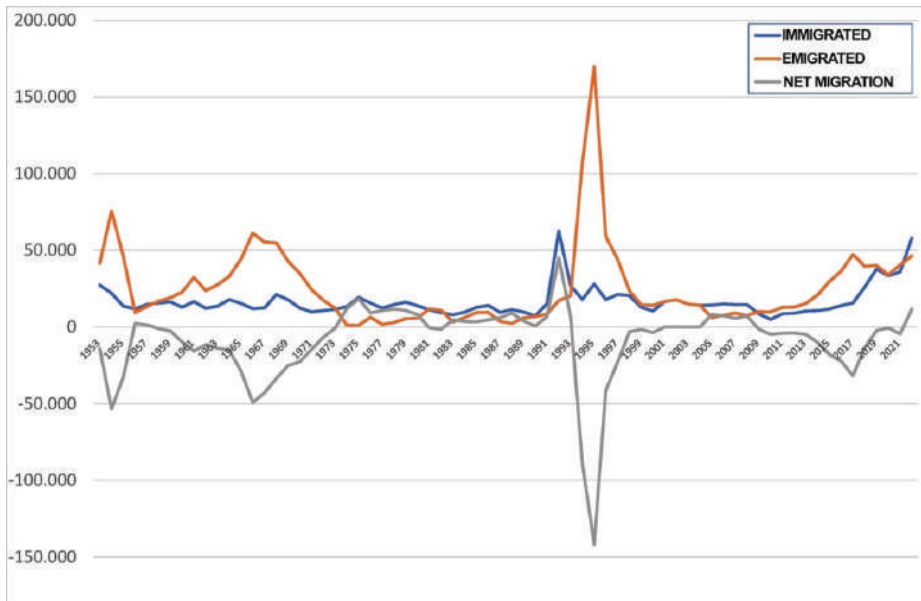
Following the demographic indicators, Figure 2 illustrates the components of the natural population movement:

1. birth rate - has recorded a constant decline in recent years in the Republic of Croatia;
2. mortality;
3. natural increase, which was positive until 1991, has been negative after 1991, indicating that we have more inhabitants who died than were born in Croatia, as well as the emigration of the fertile-age, younger population.

Figure 3 presents the external migration of the population of Croatia.

There was an increase in emigration in the 1960s and 1970s of the last century, then increased emigration in the years of the Homeland War and increased emigration again with the accession of the Republic of Croatia to the EU until the last population census in 2021.

A stronger wave of emigration began in 2008, triggered by the global economic crisis at the time, and as can be seen in graph 3, it was intensified by Croatia's entry into the EU in 2013 and can be considered the largest because it took place in circumstances of reduced fertility, - natural population decline, increased mobility of younger people age, total depopulation of the population and the rapid process of aging of the population.



### ***3. Mechanical population movement 1953-2021 (migrations)***

***Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>***

### 3. Age and Sex Pyramid 1953, 1971, 2011, 2021

The age-sex pyramid shows the distribution of the population of Croatia according to age groups and sex. It clearly presents the population of Croatia divided by five-year age groups with the male population on the left and the female population on the right. The ordinate axis is divided into age classes, with the youngest population forming the base of the pyramid, and the oldest population at the top.

The age-sex pyramid can take several forms, and pyramids show us the expression of exceptional disturbances in demographic development.

For example, in a truncated or disturbed pyramid, certain groups of the population can stick out or be drawn in (wars, mass migrations, epidemics).

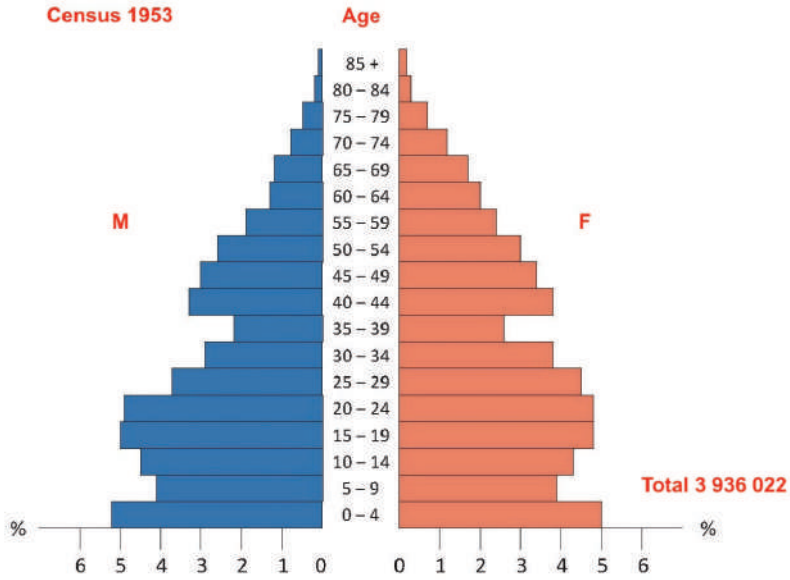
Figure 4 shows the age-sex pyramid of the 1953 population census, where the pyramidal shape is progressive, consisting of a broad base where the share of young population prevails, and population growth rates are high.

Figure 5 shows the age-sex pyramid of the 1971 census and the pyramid shape has a beehive shape (stationary type) where birth and mortality rates match and where there is no natural increase.

Figure 6 shows the age-sex pyramid of the 2011 census, it is a pyramidal shape (regressive or constrictive type) that has a very narrow base, a wide top, a small proportion of the young and a large proportion of the old population, ultimately leading to depopulation.

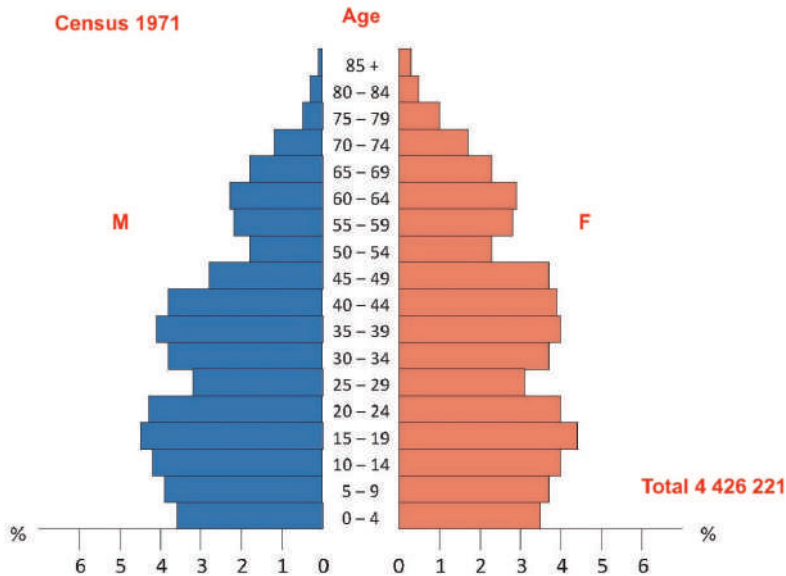
Figure 7 shows the age-sex pyramid of the 2021 census, it is again a pyramid shape (regressive or constrictive type) that has a very narrow base, a wide top, a small proportion of the young and a large proportion of the old population, ultimately leading to depopulation.

The age-sex structure of the population is an indicator of the basic trend of the development of the population, especially the tendency in its natural dynamics, but also the level of socio-economic development of the area. At the same time, it is a significant indicator of the potential of the economically active population, i.e. the workforce, which undoubtedly directly implies the direction and trend of the future socio-economic development of the area.



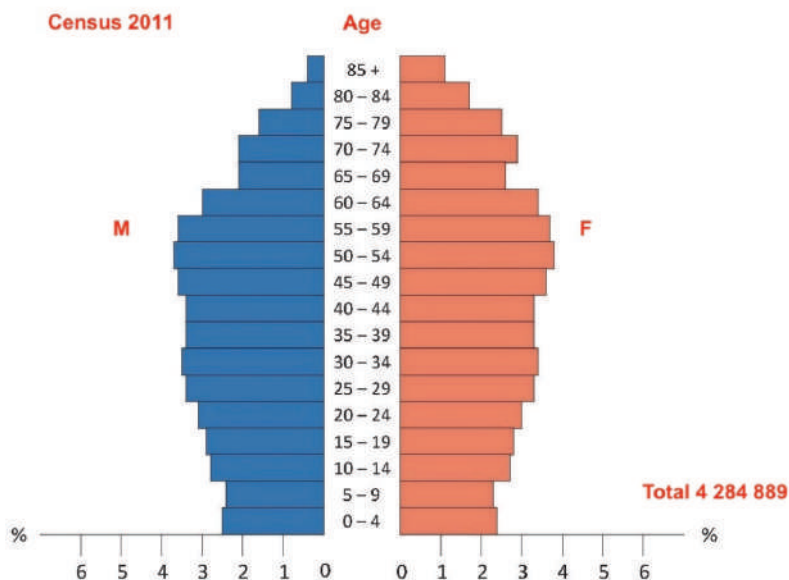
#### 4. Age-Sex pyramid 1953

Source: Population census 1953. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>



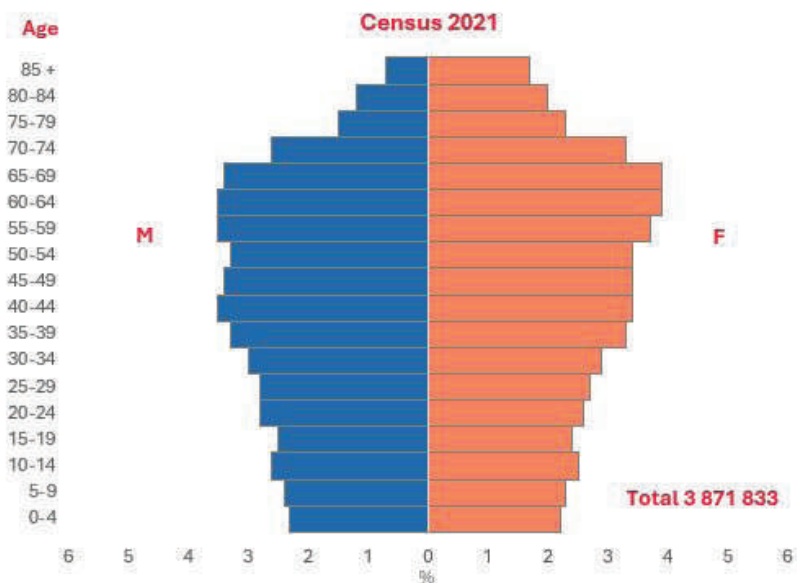
#### 5. Age-Sex pyramid 1971

Source: Population census 1971. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>



### 6. Age-Sex pyramid 2011

Source: Population census 2011. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>



### 7. Age-Sex pyramid 2021

Source: Population census 2021. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>

When we observe the changes in the age structure, we can say with certainty that they are a cause for concern because the number of young people is decreasing, and the number of elderly people is increasing. This process itself represents a worrisome social problem because even now, and especially in the future, it will lead to increasing economic and social disproportions.

#### 4. Population Aging - Age Index and Population Projections

The average age indicates the average age of the entire population of a given area (state, city, etc.). It is calculated as the arithmetic mean of the age of the population, and in Croatia it has increased by almost 14 years over the past seventy years, from 30.7 in 1953 to 44.3 according to the most recent census in 2021 (DZS).

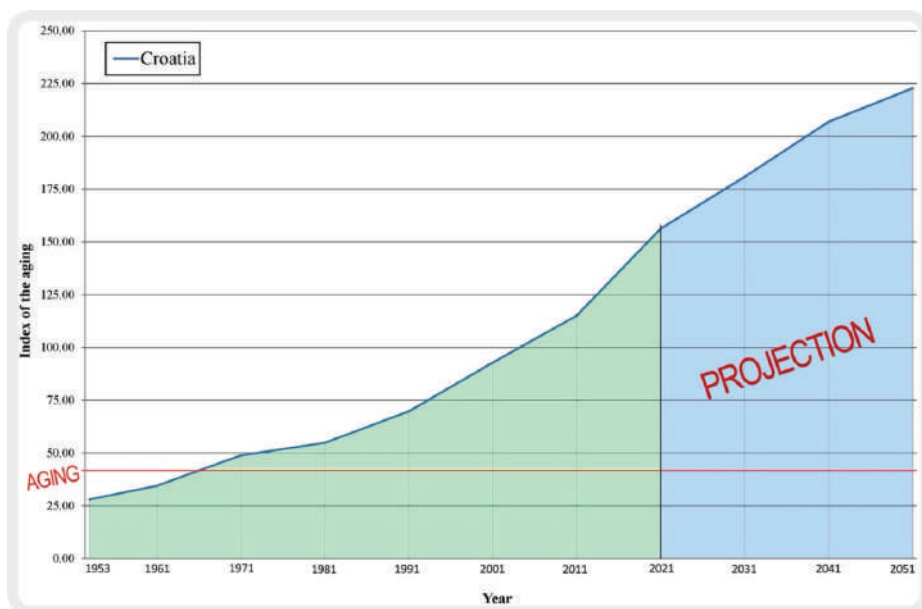
The aging index is the percentage of people aged 60 and over in relation to the number of people aged 0-19. An index greater than 40% indicates that the population of a given area has entered the aging process (Pokos, 2021; Mesarić Žabčić, 2023).

The share of the elderly population represents the percentage of people aged 60 and over in the total population. It is a basic indicator of the level of aging, and when the value exceeds 12%, it is considered that the population of a given area has entered the aging process. According to the 1953 census, the aging coefficient in Croatia was 10.3, while today, according to the results of the 2021 census, it is 29.9. According to these data, almost every third person in Croatia today is aged 60 and over (DZS).

	1953	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011	2021	2031	2041	2051
<b>Agind Indeks</b>	<b>27,92</b>	<b>34,38</b>	<b>48,79</b>	<b>54,75</b>	<b>69,61</b>	<b>92,75</b>	<b>115,03</b>	<b>156,19</b>	<b>180,78</b>	<b>206,88</b>	<b>222,76</b>
Young (0-19)	1.447.908	1.424.992	1.351.751	1.251.587	1.193.115	1.011.241	896.605	741.145	661.142	589.022	543.670
Adult (20-64)	2.212.997	2.425.927	2.389.895	2.612.735	2.750.155	2.508.159	2.629.651	2.261.449	2.063.916	1.916.306	1.756.715
Old (65+)	275.115	308.776	428.240	526.815	555.779	685.018	758.633	869.239	948.060	971.020	992.152
Young (%)	36,79	34,26	32,42	28,5	26,52	24,05	20,92	19,14	18	16,94	16,51
Adult (%)	56,22	58,32	57,31	59,5	61,13	59,66	61,37	58,41	56,19	55,12	53,35
Old (%)	6,99	7,42	10,27	12	12,35	16,29	17,7	22,45	25,81	27,93	30,13

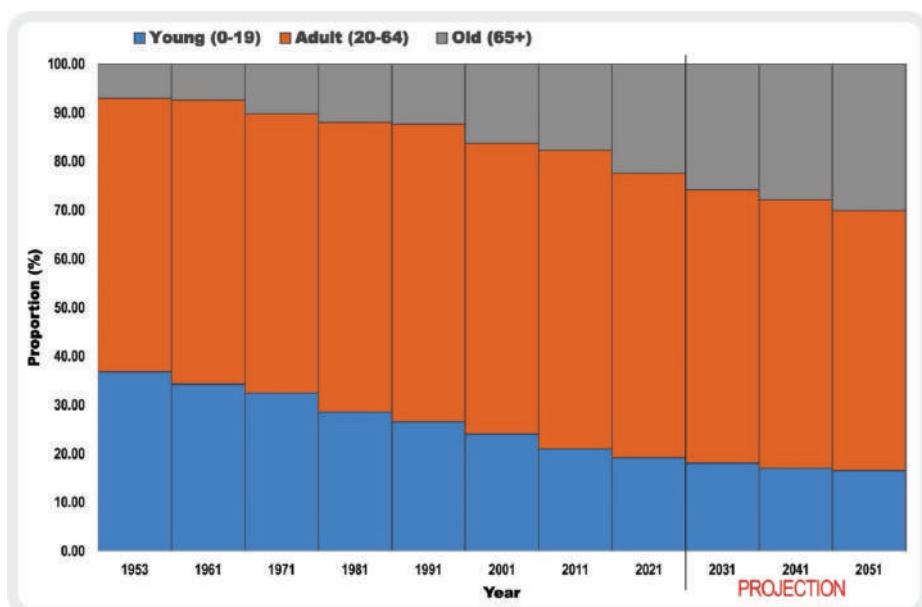
#### 8. Aging index 1953-2021 and projection of aging index 2031, 2041, 2051

*Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>*



### 9. Aging index

Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>

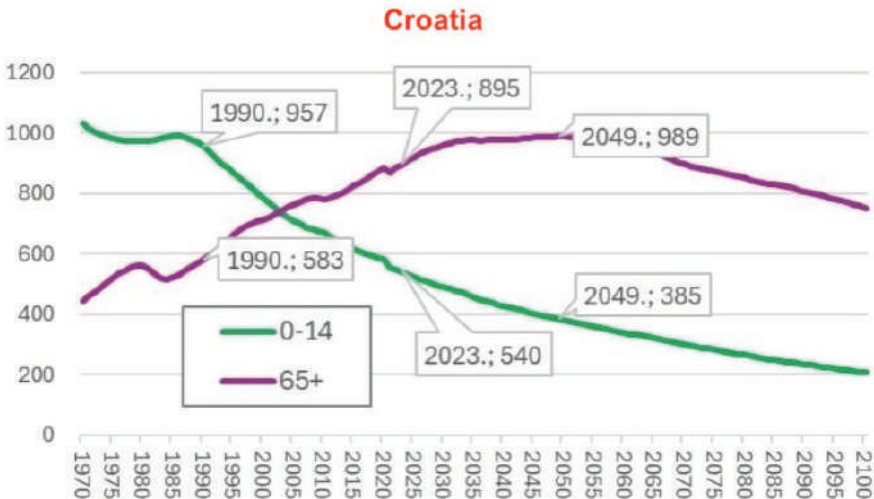


### 10. Aging proportion (%)

Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>

When we look at the data in table 8, figure 9 and 10, we see that from 1953 onward to the last census in 2021, the aging index is increasing, and the projections for 2031, 2041 and 2051 shows that the population will age further, and that the situation will become increasingly serious.

The aging of the population begins when the age index exceeds 40%, and as we can see, that was in Croatia in 1971, and because of this we can claim that since then, according to the age index, the population aging process has been ongoing for the population of Croatia, and has not ceased up to the last census in 2021. During certain periods, the intensity of population aging of the population was mitigated. Projections show that the situation in Croatia will only deteriorate, and the burden will be reflected in the pension, health, and education system.



### 11. Projection of Croatian population from 1970 – 2100 (0 – 14; 65+)

Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>

Figure number 11 illustrates the following facts: in 1991 there were 1.6 children for every person over the age of 65, in 2023 there were 1.7 people aged 65 and over for every one child under the age of 15, and it is estimated by population projection and by mathematical calculation, from 2025 onward, for every 2.6 elderly persons aged 65 and over, there will be 1 child, a ratio that is unsustainable for the pension and health systems.

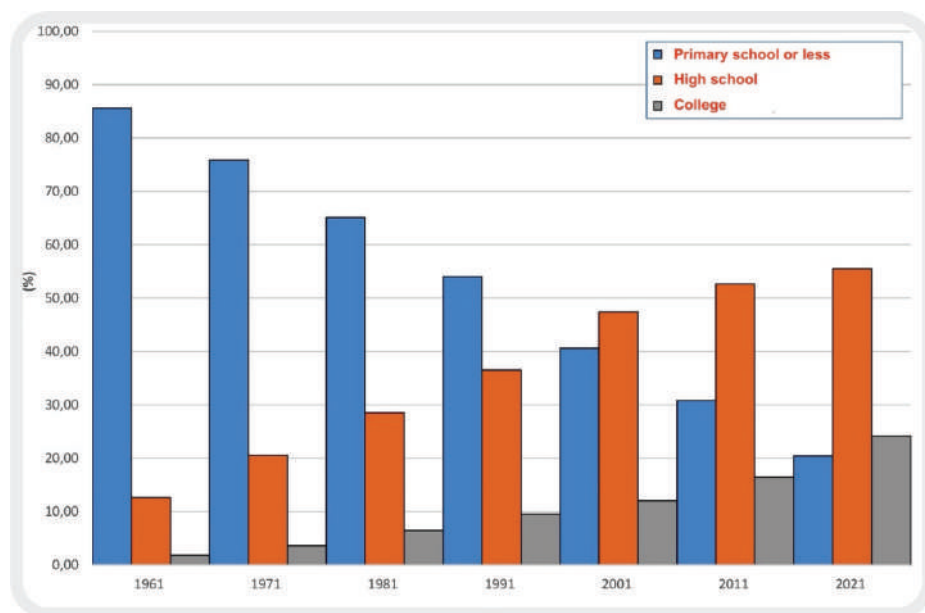
Croatia already has a relatively high share of the elderly population, and soon the Republic of Croatia will become a country with an extremely old population, which should serve as a warning and a call for measures to stabilize or mitigate this trend.

If we look at the population data, which refer to the educational structure of the population (Figure 12) for the period from 1961 to 2021, we can conclude that between 1971 to 2021, there was significant growth in secondary and higher education in Croatia.

Furthermore, Figure 13 shows that the structure of the population in the Republic of Croatia during the period from 1971 to 2021 is homogeneous. There are a total of 22 national minorities in Croatia, and the dominant Serbian minority accounts for 3%.

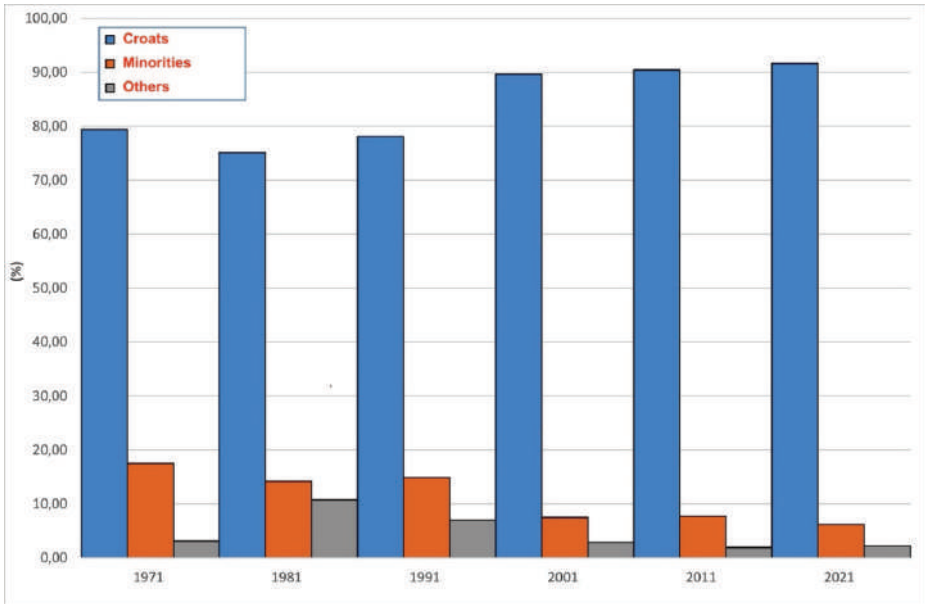
When looking at language data from the 1991-2021 population censuses (Figure 14), Croatian is the most widely spoken language in Croatia.

Of the other languages, the largest percentage refers to Serbian, Italian, Slovenian, and Hungarian.

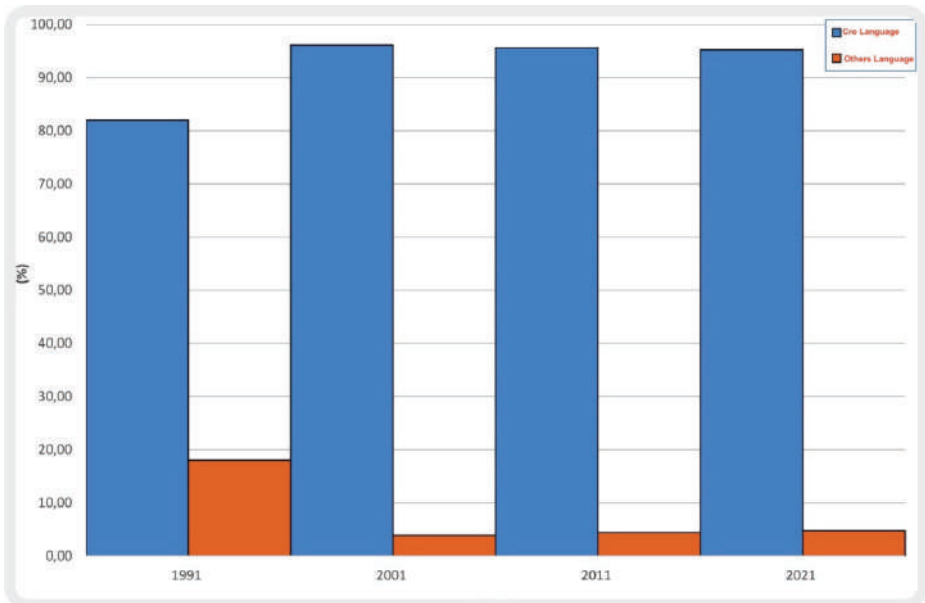


## ***12. Educational structure 1961-2021***

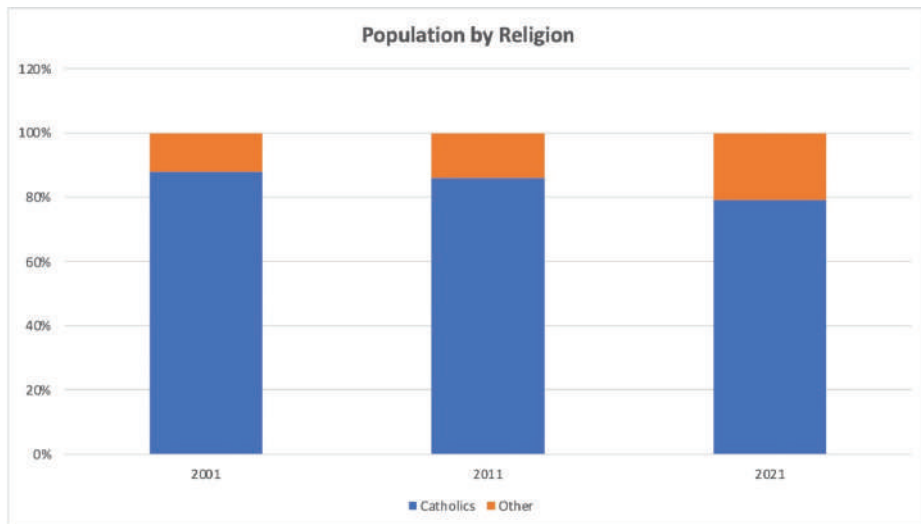
***Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>***



**13. Population by Nationality 1971-2021**  
 Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>



**14. Population by mother tongue 1991-2021**  
 Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>



### ***15. Population by religion 2001-2021***

***Source: Population census. Available at <http://www.dzs.hr>***

Looking at the data on religion in Croatia, the population censuses of 2001, 2011 and 2021 (Figure 15) show that the Catholic Church is the leading church and Christianity is the main religion in the Republic of Croatia. At the same time, census data from the 2001 and 2021 censuses indicate that the share of Catholics is declining, while the share of atheists is on the rise.

It is also important to explain why the article does not include certain demographic data, such as for the years 1953, 1961, etc. Namely, the population censuses in the former state used a different census methodology when enumerating the population, and due to this and the lack of data, it was not possible to present all demographic indicators for all census years covered in the article. For example, religion was only partially recorded during the 1953 population census and only fully since the 2001 population census. Therefore, this article provides only transparent and existing demographic data that could be analysed in accordance with census methodologies.

## **5. Summary**

The demographic picture of the Republic of Croatia is characterized by continuous natural depopulation, which specifically means a higher number of deaths than live births, an aging population, an uneven age structure of the

population, a reduced fertility rate, a constant increase in life expectancy and a negative population balance, the growth of the elderly population and persistent external migration. When we talk about the movement of the total number of inhabitants, this number has significantly decreased in the last few decades.

Demographic trends in Croatia in the natural movement of the population, in vital rates (birth rate, mortality and natural increase) and in changes in the age structure, and especially in the accelerated aging of the population, are like trends in these dimensions in many countries of Western Europe.

The Republic of Croatia is characterized by unfavourable demographic trends that are the result of long-term past trends. The consequences of long-term low fertility and centuries-old emigration from the Republic of Croatia are deeply rooted and are manifested in: long-term reduction of the total population, decline in fertility, natural depopulation (negative natural increase), demographic aging, lack of labour in areas that have been empty for a long time, the problem taking care of elderly single households in a large, sparsely populated area, the problem of the pension, health and social systems, emigration, depopulation and long-term economic decline.

Demographic changes, trends and future projections are clearly and graphically presented in 15 figures to better understand them.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we briefly reviewed the dynamic and structural-demographic characteristics of the Croatian population in the period 1953-2021, as well as the basic features, problems, and perspectives of the contemporary demographic development of the Republic of Croatia.

In this sense, particular attention is devoted to the causes and consequences of the decline in the growth rate of the total population of Croatia and the problem of negative demographic processes in the country, above all the process of natural, generational, and total depopulation, which greatly burdens and complicates the current and future population development of Croatian society. The dynamic and structural - demographic characteristics of the population according to the census years and the consequences of demographic changes are clearly and graphically presented in 15 figures to facilitate clearer understanding.

From the data, we can conclude that Croatia is a country where, regarding specific demographic and socioeconomic factors, the acceleration of the decline in the birth rate (fertility) has been recorded for more than half a century during the late phase of the demographic transition. Moreover, when compared

with Western European countries that show a similar model of natural population movement, Croatia is in a significantly less favourable demographic position with regard to the continuous emigration of the young, able-bodied, and fertile population.

For the economic and social development of every country, including Croatia, an increase in the number of young people is important. However, age-sex pyramids based on population censuses clearly show a decrease in the number of young people, which has numerous unfavourable implications. The increase in the elderly population is particularly reflected in the economic and social development of Croatia due to the specific needs of the elderly population at advanced ages. The numerical increase of the old population is directly reflected in the increase in expenditures of various social funds (pension, health and social).

This is particularly visible in the current demographic situation of the dynamic and structural components of population development because the functioning of pension insurance is based on the principle of generational solidarity, where the current workforce, with its contributions from current income, contributes to the strengthening of the pension system, where it supports the funds of the pension and health insurance fund necessary for the elderly population. Disturbances caused by the process of inversion of the age structure of the population in terms of changes in that structure, i.e. the disparity between the three large functional age groups (young, able-bodied, old) leads to serious difficulties, especially in the functioning of the pension system based on the principle of generational solidarity, and it has already placed significant strain on the health and social systems.

By analysing the dynamic and structural-demographic characteristics of the population of Croatia in the period 1953-2021, the demographic indicators showed that in the observed period, the total population of the Republic of Croatia decreased.

To address these the demographic trends, it is necessary to implement an active demographic policy, where particular emphasis should be placed on family policy, which would enable parents to more easily reconcile business obligations with the obligations of raising children. A quality family policy could be a long-term solution, but also an essential complement to other economic and social policies in helping with the demographic degradation of the Republic of Croatia.

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## **Dinamička i strukturno-demografska obilježja stanovništva Hrvatske u razdoblju 1953. – 2021.**

### Sažetak

Osnova svake demografske analize, odnosno istraživanja dinamičkih i strukturno-demografskih obilježja, trendova, pojava, odnosa i procesa u određenom vremenskom (međupopisnom) razdoblju i na određenom području (državi, regiji, naselju) empirijski su statistički podaci prikupljeni različitim tehnikama i metodama, među kojima su kroz povijest posebno važni popisi stanovništva. Riječ je o vrlo opsežnim statističkim radnjama, kojima se prikupljaju različiti podaci o stanovništvu, kućanstvima, stanovima i gospodarstvima. Načela i kriteriji suvremenih popisa stanovništva (potpunost, periodičnost, referentni trenutak popisa, definicije ukupnog stanovništva, definicije pojedinih kategorija stanovništva i dr.) uspostavljeni su sredinom 19. stoljeća i, uz manje izmjene, primjenjuju se i danas. U novije vrijeme „klasični“ popisi stanovništva, odnosno popisivanje na „terenu“, sve više ustupaju mjesto novim tehnikama i metodama prikupljanja podataka o stanovništvu (broju i njegovim strukturnim karakteristikama). U tom kontekstu internetsko popisivanje („samopopisivanje“) i registracijski popisi sve su važniji. Sukladno tome, popisne metodologije prilagođene su, tako da svaki popis stanovništva ima svoju metodologiju, zbog čije razlike nije moguće sve prikupljene podatke uspoređivati na isti način. S obzirom na poražavajući demografski razvoj Hrvatske i dostupne podatke popisa stanovništva, u radu će se prikazati prosječna starost stanovništva Hrvatske od 1953 do 2021, indeks starenja i koeficijenti starosti u razdoblju od 1953 do 2021, stanovništvo prema nacionalnoj pripadnosti 1971–2021, stanovništvo prema vjeroispovijesti 2001–2021, stanovništvo prema materinjem jeziku 1991–2021. i stanovništvo Hrvatske prema najvišoj završenoj školi i spolu od 1961 do 2021.

**Ključne riječi:** podaci popisa stanovništva, Hrvatska, demografija, migracije, stanovništvo.