

Spatial distribution of contemporary immigration in the Republic of Croatia (2021–2024)

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Croatia, traditionally a country of emigration, is gradually transforming into a country of immigration, while statistical data also record return migration flows. This paper examines the spatial patterns of migration distribution in the Republic of Croatia during the period 2021–2024. In the context of intensified migration movements and changes in Croatia's demographic structure, the study analyses how recent waves of immigrants, including the return of emigrants and their descendants, as well as the immigration of foreign nationals, are spatially manifested. Based on official statistical data the paper identifies the key centres of immigration attractiveness. The findings indicate that immigration is concentrated in major urban agglomerations with the most significant economic activities, particularly the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County, as well as in coastal regions characterized by a well-developed tourism and service sector (Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, and Split-Dalmatia County). At the same time, rural

areas continue to experience negative demographic trends, further deepening the existing regional disparities. The analysis reveals that the principal factors shaping the spatial distribution of immigration are economic opportunities (labour market conditions and economic development) and quality of life, especially in coastal areas. The paper highlights the need for targeted regional policies aimed at balancing these flows and harnessing the positive effects of immigration for the sustainable development of the national territory.

Keywords: immigration, migration, spatial distribution, regional development, Croatia, demographic trends

INTRODUCTION

Until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, Croatia was predominantly an emigration country situated within an immigration continent of which it is an integral part. Through its full membership in the European Union, Croatia assumed the responsibility of ensuring the free movement of people and goods, representing one of the fundamental rights of the EU. This right has been extensively used by Croatian citizens who, driven by the demands of European economies for a high-quality and flexible workforce, initiated a wave of emigration in 2013 that continues today, albeit with reduced intensity. The numerous economic and social benefits of membership in the European Union were overshadowed by an exceptional wave of emigration from Croatia in the first years of membership. This wave of emigration is a consequence of long-term economic and social imbalances and was initiated and accelerated by gradual opening of a few developed labour markets in Europe (Akrap & Ivanda, 2023). A negative net migration rate, coupled with negative natural population growth, has resulted in a significant reduction in Croatia's total population. The total number of inhabitants decreased by 9.64% during the intercensal period from 2011 to 2021. All counties experienced a population decline, which was particularly pronounced in the Slavonian counties and Sisak-Moslavina County. In addition to economic factors, emigration was influenced by numerous other variables that shaped a social climate conducive to departure. Following the conclusion of the pandemic in 2022 and the subsequent robust economic recovery, Croatia recorded a positive net migration rate for the first time since 2008, with 11,685 more immigrants than emigrants (CBS, 2025a). The main objective of this paper is to present the spatial distribution and temporal dynamics of contemporary immigration in the Republic of Croatia at the county level in the period from 2021 to

2024. The paper applies a descriptive and exploratory analytical approach. In addition to presenting the spatial distribution, the paper descriptively operationalizes and discusses the key economic and social determinants that shape the observed regional differences.

MIGRATION CONTEXT OF CROATIA

International migration patterns are rarely static. Numerous countries have undergone long-term transformations in their migration profiles, shifting from traditional regions of emigration to destinations for international migrants. This phenomenon is often described through the concept of migration transition, which explains how economic development, demographic change, and political integration gradually reshape migration systems over time. Countries experiencing economic growth, demographic ageing, and labour shortages frequently transition from emigration to immigration states. Croatia has recently begun to experience increasing levels of immigration, particularly in sectors facing labour shortages such as tourism, construction, and services. Consequently, Croatia has gradually started to exhibit characteristics of a dual migration system, in which emigration and immigration coexist simultaneously (Bara, 2023). Statistical data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics illustrate this transformation. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants were predominantly from neighbouring countries of South-east Europe (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and North Macedonia). However, since 2022 a pronounced shift has been observed, with a growing share of migrants originating from non-European countries such as Nepal, India, and the Philippines. In recent years, the number of foreign workers has increased significantly, reflecting both labour market demand and the adoption of more flexible immigration policies. Parallels can be observed with other European urban areas and tourism-oriented service economies where many immigrants find employment. In these contexts, numerous migrant communities are present, particularly from Asia and Eastern Europe (Van Hooren, 2010). The differences are also evident depending on the intensity of economic activity; for instance, the urbanised northern regions of Italy are more attractive to both international and internal migrants, contributing to demographic growth, in contrast to southern regions where migrant inflows are weaker (Benassi et al., 2025).

Recent research among foreign workers indicates intentions to remain in Croatia for a long time or even permanently, as well as plans for relocation and family reunification (Balabanić et al., 2025). Given Croatia's limited historical experience with immigration and integration policies, understanding this transition provides an important theoretical basis for analysing contemporary immigration patterns in the country. Despite growing academic interest in migration

processes in Croatia, the spatial dimensions of contemporary immigration remain relatively underexplored. Although statistical data clearly demonstrate a rapid increase in the number of foreign workers and residents, there is limited research analysing where these migrants settle within the country and how their spatial distribution evolves over time. The existing studies largely focus on migration trends at the national level without detailed examination of regional or urban patterns.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Chicago School of Sociology played a foundational role in shaping the early twentieth-century study of cities, race relations, interethnic relations, and immigrant experiences. Scholars associated with this tradition developed the concept of human ecology and regarded the city as a ‘natural laboratory’ for understanding social processes. Robert E. Park, a central figure of the Chicago School, formulated a key conceptual framework describing the stages through which migrants pass on the path toward eventual assimilation: contact-conflict-accommodation-assimilation. Gradual assimilation of immigrants was envisioned as a long-term solution for mitigating urban conflicts (García, 2025). Although widely discussed in the literature and applied across various contexts, there is no single universally accepted definition of residential segregation. Definitions range from a general understanding, referring to the degree to which a particular group is unevenly distributed across a geographical area, to a multidimensional conceptualization introduced by Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton (1988). Their framework identifies five dimensions of segregation: evenness, exposure, concentration, centralization, and clustering (Royuela & Vargas, 2010). In addition to economic opportunities, migrants are also attracted to areas that offer a higher quality of life. Chain migration becomes a key mechanism sustaining spatial migration patterns and can be equally significant for both internal and international migration. Migrant networks perform important functions because early migrants reduce the costs and risks for subsequent migrants by providing information, informal assistance, and various other resources (Skop et al., 2006). Migration is inherently a spatial process. Migrants are rarely distributed evenly across national territories. Instead, they tend to concentrate in regions where economic opportunities, infrastructure, and social networks are most developed. Consequently, the spatial distribution of immigrants represents a central topic within migration and urban sociology. While the regional distribution of immigrants constitutes one dimension of migration, another important aspect concerns the internal

spatial structure of cities. Migrants frequently concentrate in specific neighbourhoods or districts within urban areas, producing patterns of residential clustering or segregation. Across much of Europe, new waves of immigration during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have raised concerns regarding cultural fragmentation, social division, interethnic tensions, and growing dislike toward immigrants. Although concepts such as spatial assimilation and segregation are often operationalized at the intra-city level, they also have a direct reflection on the wider regional context. The regional attractiveness of individual areas dictates the primary reception of migrants. In the European context, regions with high tourism intensity, a developed service sector and pronounced economic dynamism such as coastal or developed industrial regions show a significantly higher intensity of immigration. This consequently creates regional polarization within the national territory, where economically dynamic regions create the need for a specific workforce, while rural and economically stagnant areas remain outside these flows. With the expansion of international migration, cities across the European Union have become characterized by increasing ethnic and religious diversity. In some urban contexts, patterns of residential segregation coincide with higher shares of residents with specific migration backgrounds (Artero & Chiodelli, 2020; Galeano & Bayona-i-Carrasco, 2018; Malmberg et al., 2018; Panori et al., 2019). One influential theoretical perspective in this field is spatial assimilation theory. According to this model, immigrants initially settle in neighbourhoods with lower housing costs and higher concentrations of other migrants. Over time, as migrants achieve socioeconomic mobility and become more integrated into the host society, they gradually move into more affluent or ethnically mixed neighbourhoods. Residential mobility thus reflects processes of social integration (Wen, 2019). An alternative perspective is place stratification theory, which emphasizes structural barriers that may constrain migrants' residential choices. Discrimination in housing markets, socioeconomic inequalities, and institutional constraints can prevent certain migrant groups from accessing more desirable neighbourhoods, resulting in persistent patterns of segregation. From this perspective, residential segregation reflects broader social inequalities rather than merely temporary stages of assimilation (Charles, 2003). Research on urban migration across Europe suggests that both processes may occur simultaneously. In some cases, migrants form ethnic enclaves that provide social support, economic opportunities, and cultural familiarity. In other cases, segregation may result from structural inequalities that limit migrants' access to housing and employment opportunities. For migrant groups undergoing processes of acculturation within society, the practices of the majority soci-

ety are important because they directly influence migrants' acculturation strategies. The majority society also undergoes a process of acculturation through its own strategies: multiculturalism, the melting pot, segregation, and exclusion (Berry, 2006, p. 35). The strategy of segregation is associated with social practices in which the marginalization of minority groups is imposed by the majority population and can be recognized as a strategy of exclusion (Berry, 2006, p. 35). Given that the concepts of assimilation, residential segregation, acculturation and spatial stratification have been primarily theoretically and empirically developed at micro-spatial units, their direct statistical operationalization requires precise data at lower levels. In the current context of contemporary immigration in Croatia, marked by high volatility of data for smaller spatial units, analysis at the macro-regional (county) level imposes itself as a necessary first step. Therefore, in this paper, the concepts are not operationalized as measurable variables but serve as a broader interpretative framework for understanding the origins of migration flows. The regional (county) distribution presented below is interpreted as a macro-precondition of the micro-process: only when hot spots of regional concentration are identified (where migrants settle at the state level), does space open up for future research that will measure the degree of segregation or spatial stratification at the city level within these specific counties. In Croatia, research on residential segregation remains relatively limited compared with that in Western European countries. However, the growing number of foreign workers and residents suggests that the dynamics of urban migration may become increasingly significant in the future. Cities such as Zagreb and other major urban centres are likely to experience increasing spatial concentration of migrants, particularly in neighbourhoods offering affordable housing and proximity to employment opportunities. Understanding residential patterns is important not only for analysing migration dynamics but also for addressing broader issues of social cohesion and integration. Spatial clustering of migrants can influence access to education, employment networks, and public services. Consequently, examining patterns of urban settlement provides valuable insights into the long-term prospects for the integration of migrant populations. Additional methodological caution is needed due to the phenomenon of secondary housing and the so-called 'fictitious population,' which obscures the real situation at the level of census units, especially in coastal areas (Čuka, 2026).

DATA AND METHODS

This study relies on official administrative data published by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS) (Croatian: *Državni zavod za statistiku*, DZS). Two datasets are used. The primary dataset contains annual records of internal and international migration flows at the municipality and county (*županija*) level for the period 2011–2024, covering all 556 municipalities and cities as well as 20 counties and the City of Zagreb. For the purposes of this study, the analysis is restricted to the post-2020 period (2021–2024), which captures the most recent immigration wave and avoids conflation with pre-pandemic mobility patterns. The second dataset contains mid-year population estimates by county for the same period, also published by CBS. The analysis is conducted exclusively at the county level (NUTS-3), which represents the primary administrative and statistical unit below the national level in Croatia. Municipality-level data, while available, exhibit substantial volatility due to small population sizes and are therefore not suitable for meaningful comparative analysis. In total, 21 spatial units were analysed: 20 counties and the City of Zagreb, which holds a distinct administrative status.

The key research variable is the number of immigrants from abroad. According to the methodology of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS), immigrants from abroad are defined as persons who have changed their country of usual residence for a period that lasts, or is expected to last, at least one year (CBS, 2025a). To enable meaningful cross-county comparisons, all absolute counts are converted to rates per 1,000 inhabitants using the corresponding annual mid-year population estimates. Net international migration was calculated as the difference between immigration from abroad and emigration abroad for each county and year. All data processing and visualisation were performed in R, using the *tidyverse* and *ggplot2* packages for data wrangling and visualisation, and the *giscoR* and *sf* packages for spatial data and mapping. The analytical approach is descriptive and exploratory. No statistical modelling is applied. The aim is to characterise the spatial distribution and temporal dynamics of recent international immigration through a set of six complementary visualisations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the spatial and temporal patterns of immigration from abroad at the county level in Croatia, with particular emphasis on differences in immigration intensity, its dynamics over the 2021–2024 period, and the international migration balance.

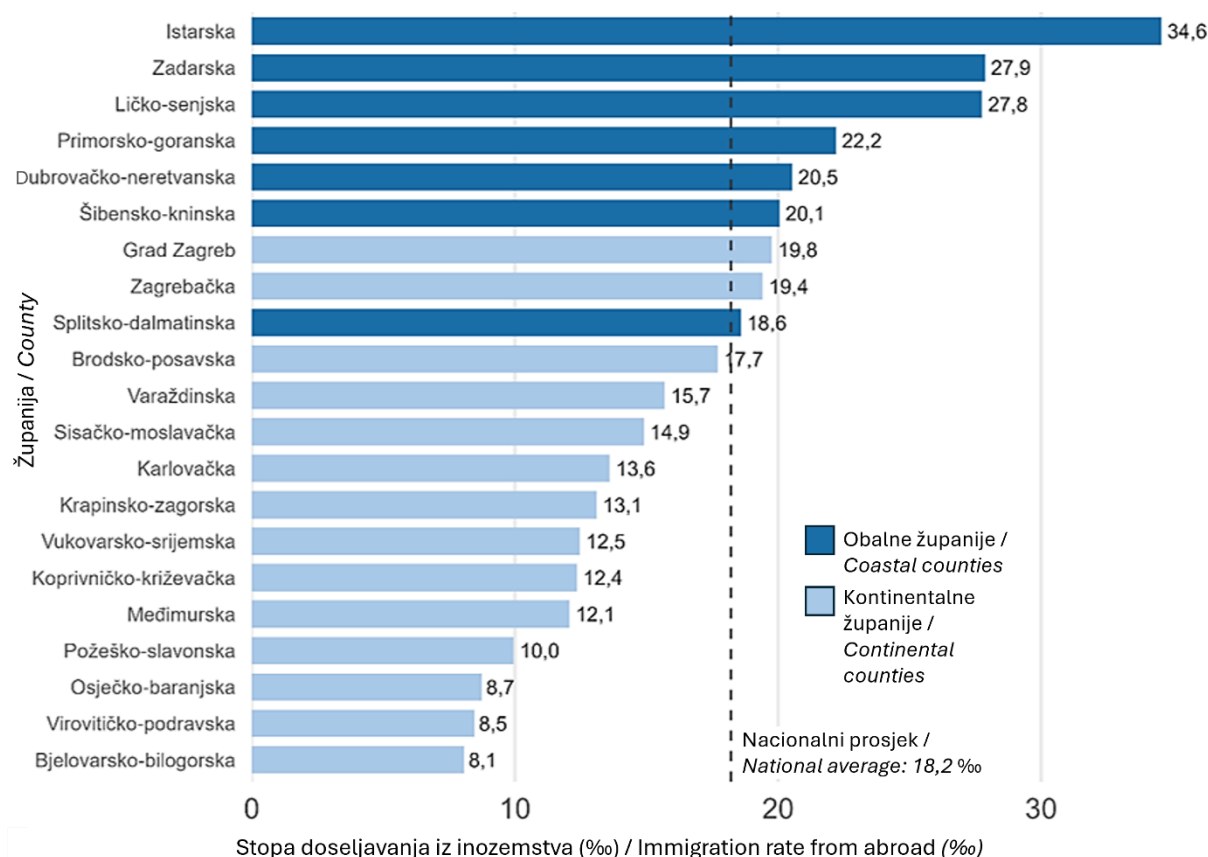


Figure 1 Immigration rate by county in Croatia in 2024 (‰)

Source: authors' calculations based on CBS (2025a, 2025b)

Figure 1 shows a highly uneven distribution of immigration rates from abroad across all 21 Croatian counties in 2024, ranked by intensity. Istria County records the highest rate at 34.6‰, nearly double the national average of 18.2‰. Zadar County and Lika-Senj County follow with rates of 27.9‰ and 27.8‰, respectively. At the lower end, Bjelovar-Bilogora County (8.1‰) and Virovitica-Podravina County (8.5‰) record rates of less than half the national average. The data reveal a clear geographic divide between Adriatic counties on the one hand and continental, particularly Slavonian, counties on the other.

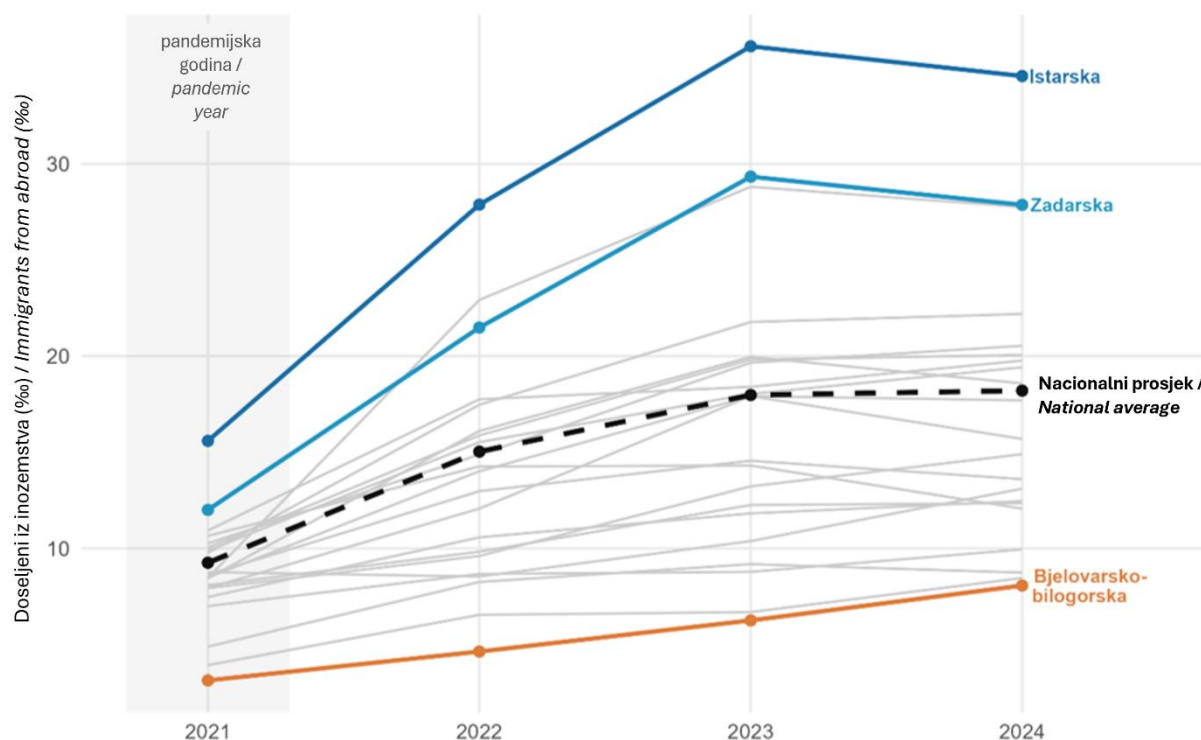


Figure 2 Trends in immigration by county in Croatia, 2021–2024 (%)

Source: authors' calculations based on CBS (2025a, 2025b)

Figure 2 traces the evolution of county-level immigration rates over the four-year study period. The most salient finding is that the upward trend is nearly universal – almost all counties experienced an increase in international immigration intensity between 2021 and 2024. This pattern suggests a structural, country-wide acceleration of international immigration rather than a redistribution between regions. Istria shows the steepest absolute increase among the highlighted counties, rising from 15.6% in 2021 to 34.6% in 2024. The gap between the highest and lowest counties widened over the period, pointing to a gradual deepening of spatial polarization. The grey lines represent the remaining counties, while Istria County and Zadar County are highlighted in blue and Bjelovar-Bilogora County in orange. The dashed black line indicates the national average, while the grey band highlights 2021 as the pandemic reference year. The gap between coastal and inland counties widened consistently over the period, suggesting an accelerating spatial polarization of recent immigration in Croatia.

The temporal dynamics within the observed period are not uniform and cannot be interpreted solely as linear growth. The year 2021 still reflects mobility restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, when international movements were significantly reduced by administrative measures and reduced demand for labour in the service and tourism sectors. The period

from 2022 to 2024 coincides with a phase of strong economic recovery and intensified labour imports from non-European countries. Therefore, the recorded increase in immigration partly represents the recovery of migration flows to the pre-pandemic level, and partly a structural strengthening of immigration as a more permanent feature of the Croatian migration system. The difference between the two sub-periods is also visible in absolute values. The national rate of immigration in 2021 was 9.26 ‰, while the average for the period 2022–2024 reaches 17.08 ‰. The largest relative increase between 2021 and the average for the period 2022–2024 was recorded precisely in coastal counties with a developed tourism economy, while in continental, primarily Slavonian counties, the growth dynamics were significantly weaker. This points to the conclusion that the pandemic year 2021 is not just a necessary reference starting point of a four-year series, but a structurally different phase, and that most of the identified spatial patterns arise from the post-pandemic dynamics of the labour market.

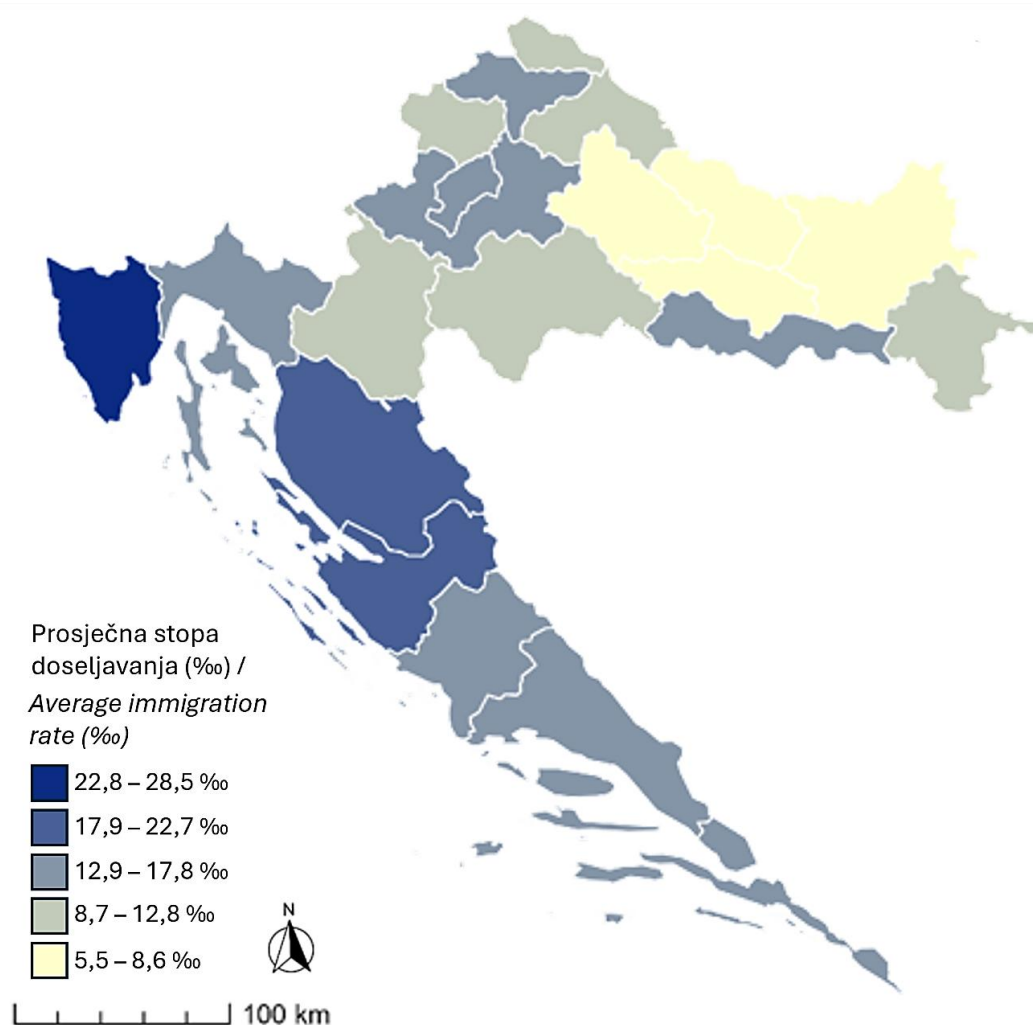


Figure 3 Average annual rate of immigration by county in Croatia, 2021–2024 (‰)

Source: authors' calculations based on CBS (2025a, 2025b)

Figure 3 maps the average annual immigration rate across counties for the full 2021–2024 period. The choropleth map confirms the coastal – inland divide identified in Figure 1 and extends it to the full temporal average. The Adriatic coast – from Istria in the northwest through the Dalmatian counties to Dubrovnik-Neretva in the south - forms a continuous high-intensity belt. The City of Zagreb and its surrounding Zagreb County occupy a middle tier, reflecting both their economic centrality and large absolute population base. Continental counties, particularly those in Slavonia, consistently record the lowest rates.

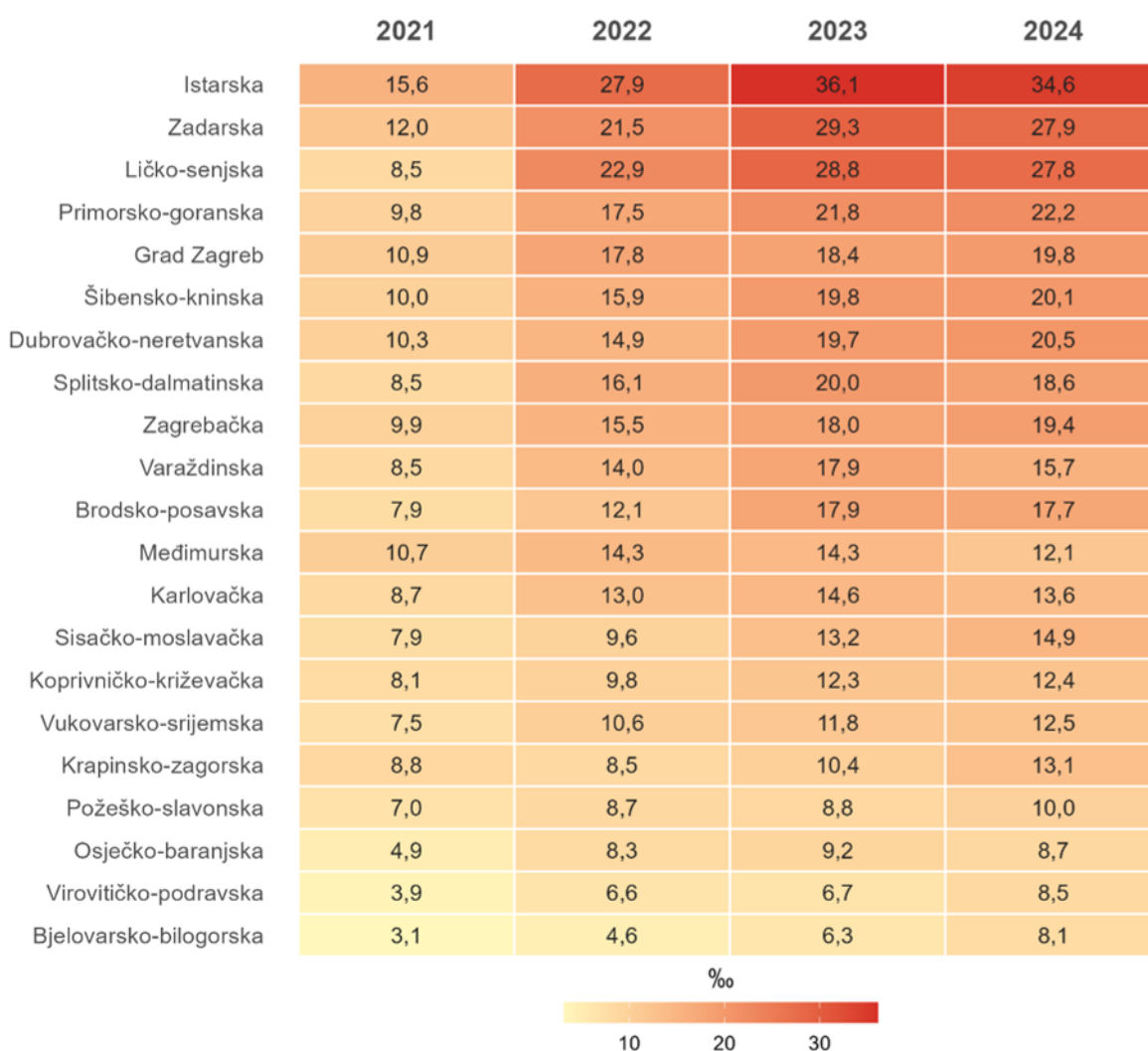


Figure 4 Immigration from abroad by county in Croatia, 2021–2024 (‰)

Source: authors' calculations based on CBS (2025a, 2025b)

Figure 4 presents immigration rates by county and year using a heatmap, allowing the spatial hierarchy and temporal dynamics to be examined simultaneously. The ranking of counties according to the average immigration rate remains almost entirely stable across all four

years, indicating the persistence of the regional hierarchy. The relative position of individual counties changed only slightly over the observed period.

The gradual intensification of the red shading from left to right confirms the general upward trend observed in Figure 2. The heatmap also shows that coastal counties, together with the City of Zagreb, generally occupy the upper part of the ranking, while an increase in immigration rates between 2021 and 2024 was recorded in almost all counties. Istria County records the highest values in each year observed, while Bjelovar-Bilogora County consistently records the lowest rates. Such a simultaneous increase across almost all counties indicates a structural strengthening of international immigration at the national level rather than its regional redistribution.

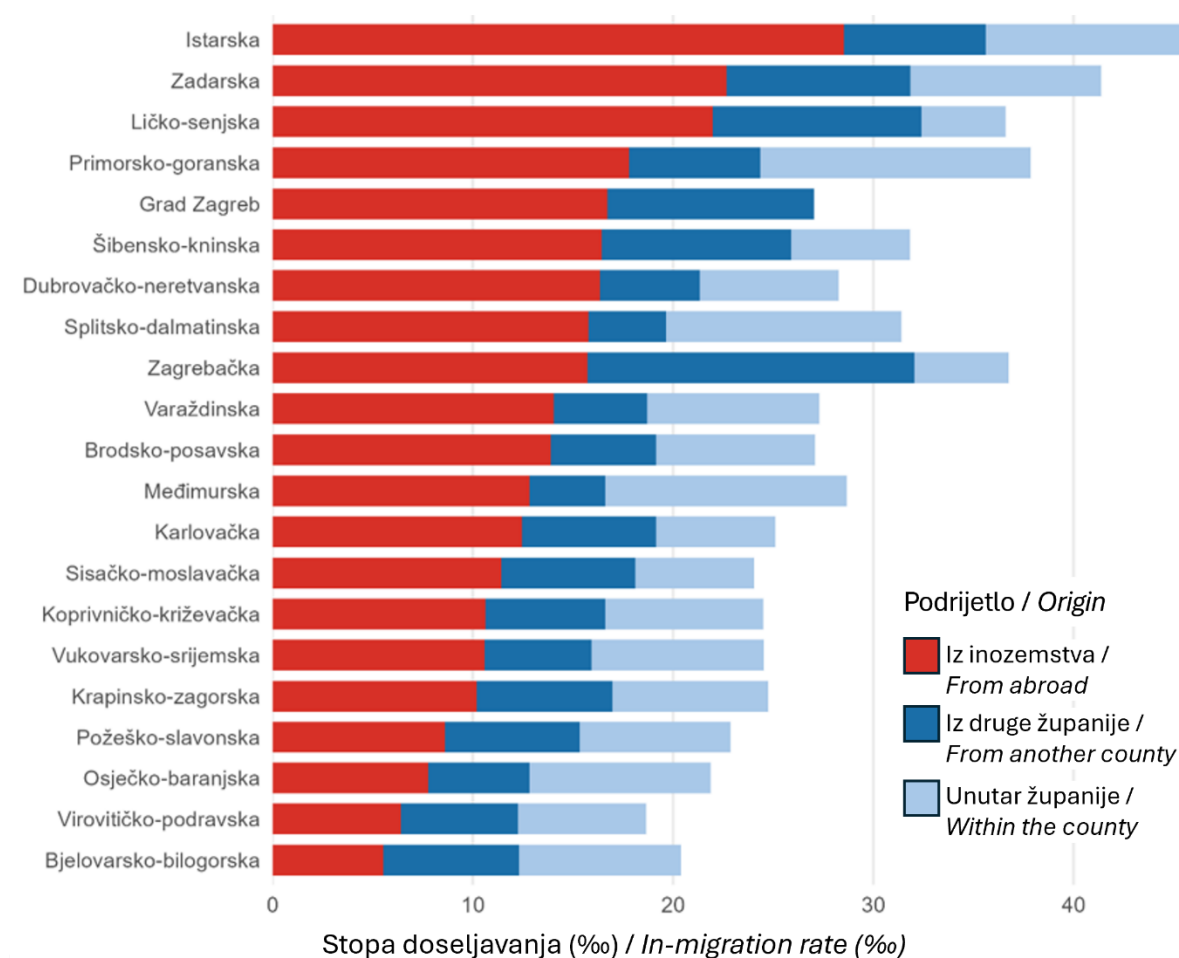


Figure 5 *Composition of migration by origin and county, 2021–2024 average (%)*

Source: authors' calculations based on CBS (2025a, 2025b)

Figure 5 disaggregates total migration by origin – migration within-county, inter-county migration, and immigration - averaged across 2021–2024. While internal migration flows are relatively stable across regions, immigration is the primary driver of variation in total migration intensity between counties. Coastal counties owe their elevated total migration rates almost entirely to the international component, whereas in continental counties the three origin streams contribute more evenly to the total. This finding underscores the spatially selective nature of immigration in Croatia, which concentrates in counties with strong tourism economies, coastal amenities, and associated labour market demand.

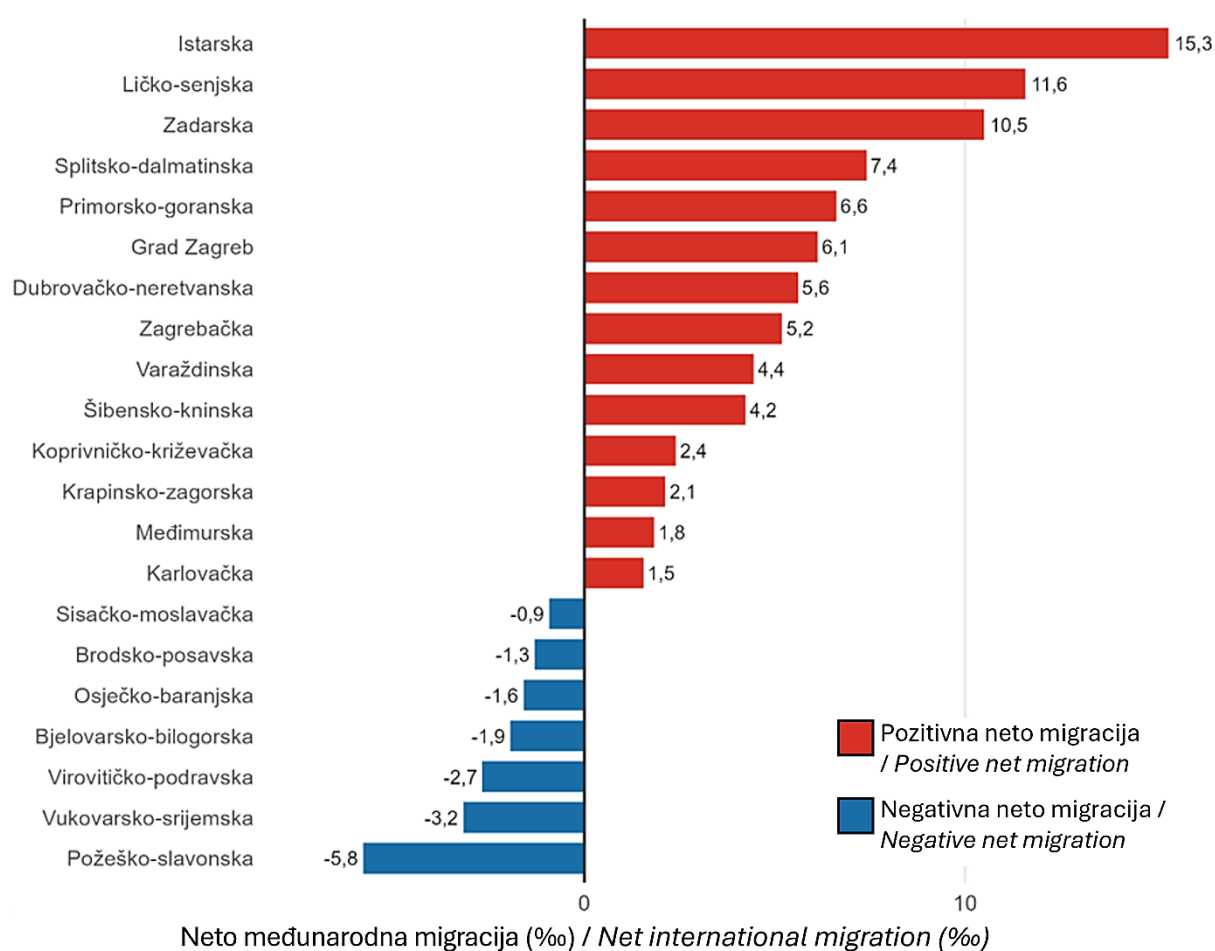


Figure 6 Average annual net international migration rate by county in Croatia, 2021–2024 (‰)

Source: authors' calculations based on CBS (2025a, 2025b)

Figure 6 presents the average annual net international migration rate, calculated as the difference between the immigration rate from abroad and the emigration rate abroad, for the period 2021–2024. The results reveal a mixed picture: while most Croatian counties record a

positive net balance, seven counties show a net international migration deficit, meaning emigration exceeded immigration on average over the period. These are predominantly continental and Slavonian counties, which already recorded the lowest immigration intensities in the preceding figures. Coastal counties – led by Istria, Zadar, and Lika-Senj accumulate the largest positive surpluses, consistent with the patterns identified in Figures 1 through 5. This finding adds an important nuance to the overall picture: while immigration is intensifying across Croatia as a whole, a substantial portion of the country is simultaneously experiencing a net population loss through international migration channels. The coastal–inland divide therefore reflects not merely differences in immigration attractiveness, but also a deeper structural asymmetry in how international migration affects regional demographic trajectories.

Table 1 Immigrants from abroad by county in Croatia, 2021–2024

County	Immigrants from abroad, 2021	Immigrants from abroad, 2022	Immigrants from abroad, 2023	Immigrants from abroad, 2024	Total immigrants from abroad, 2021–2024	Average annual immigration rate from abroad (‰)
City of Zagreb	8399	13628	14193	15306	51526	16.7
Split-Dalmatia	3582	6822	8505	7966	26875	15.78
Istria	3046	5463	7205	7011	22725	28.54
Zagreb	2967	4680	5490	5978	19115	15.72
Primorje-Gorski kotar	2600	4617	5761	5887	18865	17.80
Zadar	1922	3443	4759	4579	14703	22.67
Varaždin	1356	2223	2841	2493	8913	14.03
Osijek-Baranja	1267	2108	2323	2193	7891	7.77
Dubrovnik-Neretva	1188	1712	2268	2381	7549	16.34
Slavonski Brod-Posavina	1039	1549	2281	2238	7107	13.91
Šibenik-Knin	972	1520	1897	1918	6307	16.45
Sisak-Moslavina	1113	1323	1800	2007	6243	11.42
Vukovar-Srijem	1074	1492	1645	1714	5925	10.59

Karlovac	972	1440	1608	1494	5514	12.45
Međimurje	1123	1498	1502	1267	5390	12.83
Krapina-Zagorje	1058	1024	1240	1563	4885	10.20
Koprivnica-Križevci	820	987	1223	1226	4256	10.64
Lika-Senj	364	976	1231	1195	3766	21.99
Bjelovar-Bilogora	321	466	622	796	2205	5.53
Požega-Slavonia	451	547	544	607	2149	8.61
Virovitica-Podravina	278	454	458	572	1762	6.41

Source: authors' calculations based on CBS (2025a, 2025b)

Table 1 shows immigration from abroad by Croatian counties from 2021 to 2024, including the absolute annual number of immigrants, the four-year total number, and the average annual rate per 1,000 inhabitants, with counties ranked by the total absolute number of immigrants. Despite ranking first by per capita intensity, Istria places third in absolute volume, surpassed by the City of Zagreb and Split-Dalmatia. The City of Zagreb accounts for 22.05% of the total number of immigrants from abroad recorded in Croatia during the observed period. This relationship points to a clear distinction between the relative intensity of immigration, in which smaller coastal counties rank highest, and its absolute volume, which is greatest in the major urban centres.

The presented findings are subject to several methodological limitations that are important to highlight. First, the CBS data used are based on administrative registrations of residence and temporary residence, which may not fully reflect the actual spatial presence of migrant populations. A certain proportion of migrants from abroad, especially seasonal and contract workers, are recorded in the county of formal registration, and not necessarily in the one in which they live and work daily. Second, in coastal counties, a proportion of registrations may also reflect specific forms of statistical settlement, for example in the context of secondary housing and registrations related to real estate, which may partially increase the recorded rates above the level of actual residential immigration. Third, the analysis is conducted at the county level (NUTS-3), which is a consequence of the high volatility of data at the level of municipalities and cities due to the small number of inhabitants in a significant part of the spatial units. Such

a level of aggregation allows for stable comparative analysis, but obscures intra-regional heterogeneity, especially the differences between larger urban centres and their rural hinterlands within the same county. Finally, the analytical approach in the paper is descriptive and exploratory. The determinants of spatial distribution mentioned in the text (economic dynamics, labour market conditions, tourism, and quality of life) are interpreted based on existing literature and descriptive insights into spatial patterns, rather than formal statistical modelling. Formal testing of the links between immigration intensity and individual economic and social factors, as well as analysis at lower spatial levels in counties with the highest immigration intensity, represent logical directions for further research.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the spatial distribution of recent immigration in Croatia during the period 2021–2024, drawing on official CBS data and a set of six complementary visualisations and one summary table at the county level. The findings confirm that Croatia's ongoing transition from an emigration to an immigration country is spatially uneven. Immigration is strongly concentrated in coastal and Adriatic-adjacent counties, with Istria, Zadar, and Lika-Senj recording the highest rates relative to population size, while Slavonian and other continental counties consistently lag. However, analysis of the absolute number of immigrants reveals a different ranking among the counties. The City of Zagreb accounts for 22.05% of the total number of immigrants from abroad during the observed period, followed by Split-Dalmatia County and Istria County.

This distinction between immigration intensity and immigration volume is analytically important - smaller coastal counties attract disproportionately large flows relative to their population, but the largest urban agglomerations remain the dominant destinations in absolute terms. Net international migration furthermore remains negative in seven predominantly continental counties, revealing that emigration still outpaces immigration in a substantial part of the national territory. These patterns align with broader European evidence linking immigration concentration to labour market demand, tourism economies, and urban centrality. Addressing the resulting regional disparities will require targeted demographic and development policies capable of distributing the benefits of immigration more equitably across the Croatian territory.

Author Contributions:

K. I.: conceptualization, methodology, writing – original draft preparation, software, writing – review and editing, supervision, validation.

M. B.: conceptualization, investigation (literature review), writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing, validation.

R. M. Ž.: investigation (literature review), resources, writing – review and editing, funding acquisition.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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