

# Population ageing in Croatia – the case study of the Zadar County

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## Abstract

With the population of 4.2 million inhabitants, Croatia is ranked among the smallest countries in Europe. The most prominent demographic processes in the last several decades have been depopulation and population ageing. According to the official census data, in the period from 1971 to 2011 the proportion of the elderly population increased from 10.2 to 17.7 per cent, and the mean age of the population increased from 34.0 to 41.7. The above-mentioned changes were the result of two negative demographic processes – long-term intensive emigration of young adults and natural decrease, which were additionally intensified by the Homeland War in early 1990s and economic crisis in late 2000s.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the population ageing in Croatia from 1971 onward and investigate the causes and consequences of that process, particularly in the context of age-related expenditure. However, since there are significant regional changes in population ageing, the example of the Zadar County will be used to underline the differences, particularly between coastal settlements on one hand, and the insular and hinterland settlements on the other.

**Keywords:** population ageing, Croatia, Zadar County, depopulation

## Introduction

In 2011, when the last population census was conducted, Croatia had 4.28 million inhabitants, which almost equaled the population Croatia had in 1960s. In the last several decades, demographic development in Croatia has been marked by many unfavorable trends, which have become the limiting factors of the socio-economic development of the country. One of the most prominent demographic trends is population ageing, which has been the result of long-term emigration of young adults in their working and reproductive age and consequent natural decrease. 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 due to different internal and external factors. Zadar County is located in the central part of the Croatian coast, and it includes three distinct geographic regions: coastal area, the islands and the hinterland, each of which had its specific demographic development.

## **Objective and methods**

The aim of this paper is to analyze the proportions of population ageing in Croatia from 1970s, and discuss the causes and consequences of that process. Also, since there are significant regional differences in the intensity of population ageing, the example of the Zadar County is used to highlight the differences and discuss their underlying causes. The analysis is based on the official population census data published by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, and, where applicable, on official estimates.

## **Results and discussion**

In 1971, Croatia had 10.2 per cent of elderly population, and that proportion continued to increase in the following decades and reached its peak in 2011 at 17.7 per cent. That increase was accompanied by simultaneous decrease of the proportion of young population, so consequently, in 2001, Croatia had more elderly than young population. Also, the mean age of the population increased from 34.0 to 41.7 years. The above-mentioned trends were the result of long-term emigration and consequent natural decrease. In the last fifty years the total fertility rate in Croatia has been below the replacement level, and for the last 25 years the number of births each year has been lower than the number of deaths (the only exceptions were 1996 and 1997, when small-scale baby boom was recorded).

Differences in demographic development and in the intensity of population ageing in Zadar County and its geographic regions has been strongly influenced by intensive industrialization and urbanization from 1960s onwards, and by the Homeland War in the first half of the 1990s. The population ageing first occurred on the islands, due to long-term emigration and scarce natural resources, which prompted the emigration. On the other hand, the ageing intensified in the hinterland during and after the Homeland War, when this area was largely occupied and the population was displaced. The level of population ageing is the lowest in the coastal area as the result of immigration and more favorable natural change.

## **Conclusion**

Croatia has been faced with intensive population ageing for several decades, and this process has been particularly dynamic in economically less developed and rural parts of the county, particularly those that were occupied during the Homeland War. The islands were affected by ageing much earlier than most of the other parts, which reflected in significantly higher mean age of population. Similar trend occurred in the hinterland somewhat later, accelerated by the Homeland War. The intensity of population ageing was lower in urban

centers and in the coastal area. Nonetheless, population ageing is one of the most important demographic issues on national level, and high proportion of elderly population and old-age dependency ratio, coupled with the long-term economic crisis and high unemployment rate hinder the socio-economic development of the country.