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DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF LIKA REGION

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to review and point out the demographic situation and processes happening in Lika Region (Croatia) today, as well as to describe the changes in the population structure with particular emphasis on changes in the ethnic structure of the population that have occurred over the past two decades. For centuries, Lika has been inhabited by the population of dual religious structure with different socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics. The area where the diverse population of Lika's variety lives today is characterized by clear and steady depopulation, changed population structure (age, ethnicity) and changed administrative and territorial organization. Jovan Cvijić in his *Balkan Peninsula and the South Slavic Countries* in this group (Lika's variety) places the population living "between the Velebit mountain on the west and Kapela and Plješevica on the east". This is the area of today's southwestern Croatia, consisting of two towns (Gospić, Otočac) and eight municipalities (Brinje, Donji Lapac, Gračac, Lovinac, Perušić, Plitvice Lakes, Udbina, Vrhovine), belonging to two counties (Lika–Senj, Zadar).

Key words: Lika, depopulation, population aging, ethnic structure

Introduction

Lika is an important, individual, physiographic and cultural entity. The individuality is reflected in the historical development and the ethnographic processes of this area. The depopulation and an extremely unfavorable age structure are only the consequences of the negative, long-term demographic trends and historical factors that characterized this area.

There are several reasons that impose the need for more detailed research of the population in the area of Lika. The first reason to be pointed out is the specific ethnic structure of the population, which has been further disturbed by the war in this region. Secondly, Lika, as Croatian rural periphery has been exposed to intense population exodus, especially during the last two decades. The main characteristic of this area is a constant intensive emigration to larger urban centers. As factors that have contributed the most to the unfavorable demographic trends are permanent stagnancy of the region compared to the rest

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of the country, physiographic characteristics of the terrain (mountain-karst terrain), unfavorable historical development (within the Military Border), inadequate or non-existent transport infrastructure.

The paper discusses the basic demographic characteristics of the Lika region (five municipalities until 1991, ten municipalities since 2001). The authors determined the territorial scope of paper by natural boundaries of this region, which means that Senj, Karlobag and Novalja municipalities (Lika–Senj County) are excluded from the analysis, but Gračac municipality (County of Zadar) is added, due to territorial changes that will be discussed in the Methodology part of the paper, for certain demographic indicators' analysis was performed according to the territorial organization of the Republic of Croatia, which was valid until 1992.

Demographic development of the Lika region, as already mentioned, is characterized by continuous and intensive depopulation. In the period of 1948–2011 the population declined by 65%, with largest population decline in the inter-census period 1991–2001 when the population decreased by 45% (from 71,416 to 41,191). The intensive emigration has left a deep mark on the age structure as well as on the natural growth of the local population.

Geographical Location and Natural Characteristics of Lika

Lika is the continental region of Croatia, with natural border of Velebit Mt. on the west and south and Plješevica Mt. on the east. The northern border is an area of town Ogulin, which is also a border between Lika and Primorje–Gorski Kotar County (Mountain District). As a region, it can be characterized as a mountain plateau at altitudes between 450–700 m. Lika also connects continental and coastal parts of Croatia. Zagreb–Split highway and main roads Zagreb–Split and Zagreb–Zadar pass through Lika. The area of the Lika region amounts to 2,280 km², which makes 9.3% of the total territory of Croatia. It is important to emphasize that according to the latest 2011 Census, this area had a population of 39,165 which is less than 1% share in the total population.

For deep population analysis, it is of great importance to consider the methodological changes in some censuses. These changes prevent demographic indicators comparison, especially for the 1991 and 2001 Census. The 1991 census was conducted according to the concept of permanent residents (including citizens working/staying abroad), while the 2001 census was carried out according to the concept of present residents (citizens working/staying abroad for up to one year). In this paper, the time frame of research for the total

population is the period 1857–2011, and for natural population trend analysis is the period 1964–2011.

The analysis includes the following towns/municipalities: Gospić, Otočac, Perušić, Lovinac, Brinje, Donji Lapac, Plitvička jezera, Udbina, Vrhovine, Gračac (Table 1).

Table 1 Spatial structure of Lika

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LIKA	CENTRAL LIKA	Gospić	town
		Perušić	municipality
	GACKA	Lovinac	municipality
		Otočac	town
		Brinje	municipality
	KRBAVA	Vrhovine	municipality
		Korenica	settlement
	SOUTHERN LIKA	Udbina	municipality
		Gračac	municipality
	LIČKO POUNJE	Donji Lapac	municipality

Source: Pejnović (2009)

Law on Counties, Towns and Municipalities in the Republic of Croatia (Official Gazette 90/92) formed 21 counties (including the city of Zagreb as a county), 70 towns and 419 municipalities as units of local government. By this law, Croatian administrative spatial division has experienced major changes; primarily in the number of municipalities and the introduction of the city as an administrative-spatial unit.

Table 2. Changes in administrative organization in Lika according to 1991 and 2011 Census

STATUS		
	1991 Census	2001 Census
Gospić	municipality	town
Otočac	municipality	town
Brinje	settlement; municipality	Otočac municipality (12 settlements)
Donji Lapac	municipality	municipality
Lovinac	settlement; municipality	Gračac municipality (10 settlements)
Perušić	settlement; municipality	Gospić municipality (18 settlements)
Plitvička jezera	settlement; municipality	Otočac municipality (41 settlements)
Udbina	municipality	Titova Korenica municipality
Vrhovine	settlement; municipality	Otočac municipality (7 settlements)
Gračac	municipality	municipality

Source: SZS, 1992; CBS, 2002;

At the time of the 1991 Census, there were 102 municipalities, but 419 municipalities during the 2001 Census. These changes significantly hamper the

comparability of demographic phenomena and processes during the period of modern census. Just for the Lika region, until 1991 Census, there were 5 municipalities, and in 2001 and 2011 Census, the total number of municipalities was 10 (Table 2.).

Population in Lika

Origins of Population in Lika

Archaeological research indicated that the region of Lika has been inhabited since the prehistoric period, the inhabitants of which belonged to the Indo-European group (like throughout Europe and the Mediterranean). The first known inhabitants were the Thracians, who were suppressed by the Illyrians. Lika was inhabited by the Illyrian tribe of Japodi who were engaged in livestock breeding. The settlements were formed along the edges of karst fields (Balen-Letunić, 2006). With the arrival of the Romans, a fight against Japodi tribe began and lasted for almost 300 years, until they were defeated. Their country became the Roman province of Illyricum. The process of Romanization and traffic construction of infrastructure started in Lika. The population was mixed and lived in this area until the appearance of the Goths.

The crossing of the Turks across the Bosphorus represented an important development in the history of the entire Southeast Europe. With the arrival of Turks into the Balkans, the great migration of the population which would have a decisive impact on the population of Lika began. The Turkish authorities have occupied Lika in 1528 and incorporated it first in Bosnia, and since 1537 in Sandžak of Klis (Šabanović, 1959). The Turkish authorities have simultaneously reorganized the settlements as well as the military civil administration in this area. North of the river Krka and Knin gained the Sandžak of Klis and established a new one, which was first called Krk and then Lika. On the territory of the “Turkish Lika and Krbava” there were seven districts. This territorial organization was maintained until the withdrawal of the Turkish army. After the liberation of Lika and Krbava from the Turkish authorities (1689) from this area, there were a large number of people of Muslim religion left. In that period, those areas were inhabited by five ethnic groups: Serbs, Croats, Bunjevci, Muslims, and Kranjci.

Since the end of the 18th century until the end of the reign of the Military Border (70s of the 19th century) larger part of Central Lika, Southern Lika, Southern Krbava and Western part of the upper Pounje were in the composition of the Regiment of Lika. In the period 1818–1918, the former semi-organization was replaced by a single territorial entity — Lika-Krbava County with the town of

Gospić, which is still the seat of Lika-Senj County. The Lika region was characterized by constant emigration from this area. The most common reasons were poor quality of soil (lack of food), political events (wars), and the need for better living conditions. The current structure of the population of Lika is a result of the settlement of the area at the end of the 17th and early 18th century (Uzelac, 2004). This area was settled by people from different regions (Ogulin, Kupa, settled Bunjevci, Serbs from the Hercegovina, and Croats from Bosnia).

Jovan Cvijić's observations about population in Lika

Jovan Cvijić (1966), in his book *Balkan Peninsula and the South Slavic Countries* paid special attention to the population of Lika. He considered that it is particularly interesting to study the population of Lika, immediately after the Montenegrin tribes. He pointed out that in these two areas, very remote one from another, he recognized the same main psychological traits, which were developed under the influence of geographical, social and historical causes, which gave them special features.

Furthermore, he compared the climate in Lika to the Montenegrin climate. He pointed out that it is harsh, winters are very snowy and very cold, with frequent strong winds and rain in autumn, while summers are chilly. He presented Lika as an area where “life is hard and huge efforts are invested into cultivating fruit”; under these conditions, strong people, who can bear scarcity and troubles as Montenegrins, evolved. Likewise, those people multiplied quickly, as well as constantly emigrated to other areas, especially to America.

He established the origin of population which has little similarity to the natives before the 16th century, but more to immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina. He claimed that they are clean Dinarics according to language, tradition and habits.

Cvijić also claims that the period of the Turkish rule had an important impact on the population in Lika, but the influence of the Military Frontier was even stronger. Before that period, the people lived in scattered villages, which military administration changed to road villages where houses were listed on both sides of the road. Additionally, the management introduced the discipline and order, which made the people from Lika become the best defenders of the dynasty for all European battlefields. After the abolition of the Military Frontier, they turned to a variety of crafts, trade and more advanced farming.

Basic Demographic Characteristics of the Population of Lika

In the 20th century, the population of Lika was characterized by a severe and permanent depopulation. The main reason for the depopulation was the economic weakening of the region because of the dissolution of the Military Border, which led to the collapse of the previous social and economic structures. At the same time, in those areas, there was not a large urban center which would stop the exodus of the population from these areas, since a long time ago in this region various people lived in many towns, market towns and villages (Lopašić, 1884). Today, the main features of this area are: the lag in regional development, depopulation with a tendency of demographic extinction, poorly developed institutions, etc. Significant changes after the last war in the 1990s (1991–1995) occurred in this area, which were the most evident in the structure of population density areas as well as the changes in the demographic structure of the population.

In 1712, the region of Lika was connected to the Military Border, while the same area in 1881 merged with the civil Croatia and Slavonia. After that, the process of emigration was intensified, mainly to the lowland areas of the country (Pejnović, 1991). This led to a population decrease by 6% (1869/1880). Favourable conditions in terms of components of natural population growth (reducing mortality rates and the birth rate at a relatively high level) resulted in an increase in population in the next period (10%). Until the beginning of the 20th century, Lika-Krbava County population was higher than it could be fed (due to poor mountain soil). Accordingly, during 1905, 3,834 inhabitants moved out of the county, and majority of this population was permanently settled overseas. Until the aforementioned year, the population of Lika increased, but in subsequent years this area registers the decrease in population which is present to this day. During this period, the most densely populated district was Brinjski Kotar (56 inhabitants/km²). Settlements were small, 88% of all the villages in Lika-Krbava County had fewer than 500 inhabitants, while the largest settlements were Gospić, Senj and Otočac (Holjevac, 2009).

In the period between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II, the emigration to overseas countries decreased, which increased the intensity of the internal migration (seasonal labour) (Pejnović, 1991). According to the 1931 Census, 90% of the population lived from agriculture. The Census after World War II (1948) in Lika registered 24% less people than in the list in 1931. This reduction caused by wartime losses and significant part of the population was colonized to Vojvodina. After World War II the most intense emigration took place during the 1960s, and estimations are that until 1980s about 36,000

inhabitants moved out of Lika. All areas, except the larger urban centres had a negative net migration (Akrap & Gelo, 2009). Migration was mainly oriented towards the major urban centers, primarily Zagreb and Rijeka, or temporary work/stay abroad, mainly in western European countries. Further, relocation to temporarily stay/work abroad, mostly turned into permanent emigration (Akrap, 1999).

Table 3. Population change in Lika in period 1857–2011.

Census	Population	Population change Index
1857	138,372	-
1869	145,749	105.3
1880	135,702	93.1
1890	149,911	110.5
1900	164,872	110.0
1910	158,554	96.2
1921	155,684	98.2
1931	151,481	97.3
1948	111,030	73.3
1953	106,361	95.8
1961	100,454	94.4
1971	91,080	90.7
1981	76,993	84.5
1991	71,716	93.1
2001	41,191	57.4
2011	39,165	95.1

Source of data: CBS, 2005, 2012

Weak economic and business development caused a massive and continuous emigration from this area. Analyzing the entire period (1857–2011) the population decreased 72% (Table 3). The largest decrease was in Lovinac municipality (since 1992 aside from Gračac municipality) in which the number of residents at the beginning of the reporting period (1857) was 12,120 and in 2011 only 1,007 were registered. During the period from 1910 to 2011 the population decreased by 76%. Considering a period of modern censuses (1948–2011), the total population of Lika decreased by 65%. The census data have shown the continuous decrease of the population in Lika which indicated that this area was affected by depopulation at the end of the 18th century.

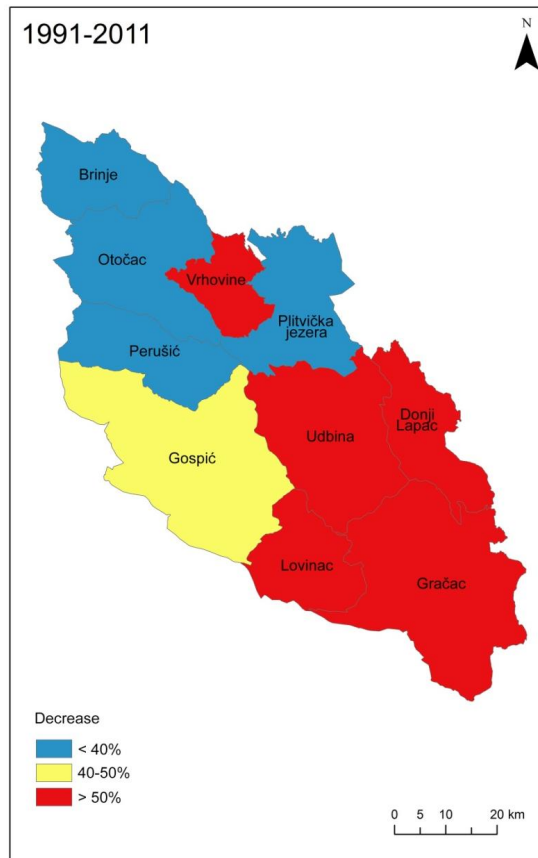


Figure 1. Population change in towns/municipalities in Lika, 1991–2011.
Source: CBS, 2005

Inter-census period 1991–2001 was very important as the period in which all the municipalities scored the largest decrease in population, which was a result of war in the area. During this period in Lika, the population decreased by 43%, and it was most evident in the municipalities of Lovinac (64%), Udbina (64%), Vrhovine (63%) and Gračac (65%). These municipalities (excluding Lovinac) had a majority of the Serbian population. According to the last census, these municipalities recorded an increase in population, which could be the result of the return of the exiled Serbs, mostly elderly population.

Natural Population Trends

Natural population trend is determined by the intense emigration and the level of the socio-economic development of this area (Pejnović, 1991).

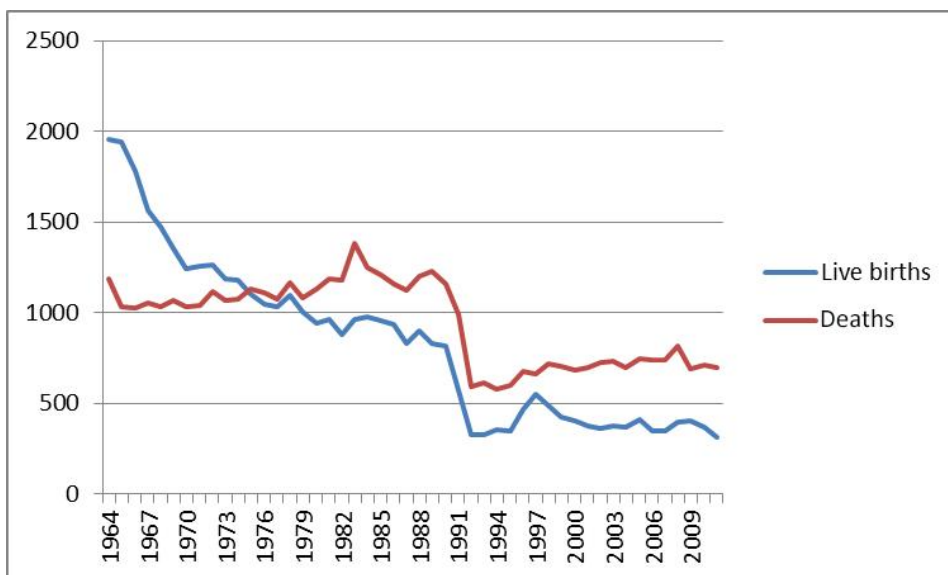


Figure 2. Components of natural change in Lika, 1964–2011.

Underdeveloped areas and the deficit of young, reproductive population caused the negative natural population growth in almost all municipalities in the Lika region. Lika is a unique area in the Republic of Croatia which since the early-20th century (1900s) registered a reduction of the total population (in the period 1900-1910 the population trend reduced by 8%). Since 1975, the natural population growth in those areas has had a constant negative value.

Age and Sex Structure

Aging processes of the population are one of the most important demographic characteristics in the Lika region. In the early 20th century (1900) the situation was much more favorable: 54% of the population consisted of young people aged 0–19 years, while those over 60 years made only about 7% (Statistical Yearbook of Croatian and Slavonian Kingdom, 1913). During the 20th century in all municipalities in this area there were significant changes in the age structure of the population. In all post-war censuses (1948–2011) there was a decreasing share of young people (0–14) and an increasing share of the elderly (65+).

Unfavourable natural and migration trends contributed to the worse age structure of the population in Lika than in rest of the country. The 1981 Census registered about 15% of the young population and 17% of the population aged 65 and over in Lika (Figure 3). Compared among the municipalities, equal share (17%) of

the young and old population was recorded in Gračac municipality. Otočac municipality had the lowest share of young (14%), and the largest proportion of the aged population (19%).

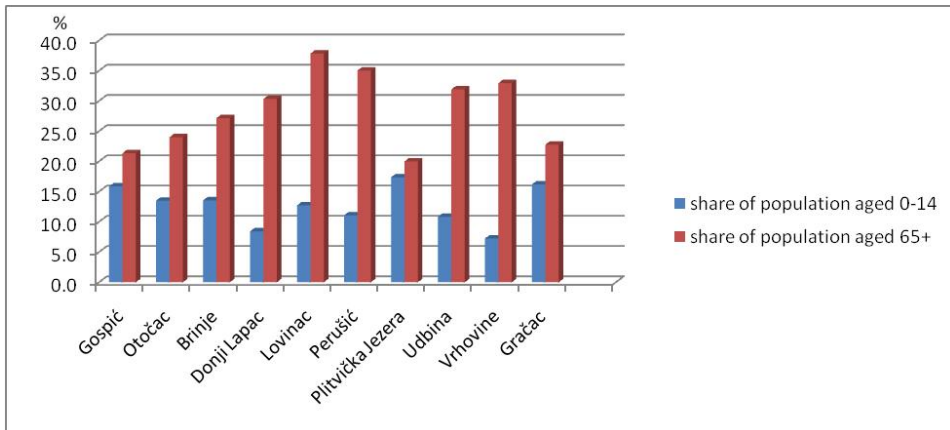


Figure 3. Share of young aged and elderly in total population 1981

The 2011 Census showed a reduced share of young population (13%), while the share of the elderly increased significantly (25%) compared to 1981 and 1991. Intense emigration, especially the young-working age population as well as the events during the war in the nineties led the population in Lika to be with extremely unfavorable age structure (phase of deepest demographic age). Compared among the municipalities (Figure 4), the lowest proportion of the young people (8%) and the largest share of the elderly (30%) were recorded in the municipality of Donji Lapac. This situation is caused by the fact that this area is inhabited mostly by Serbs, which, on one hand, stayed in this area during the war or, on the other, came back after the war as returnees (refugees).

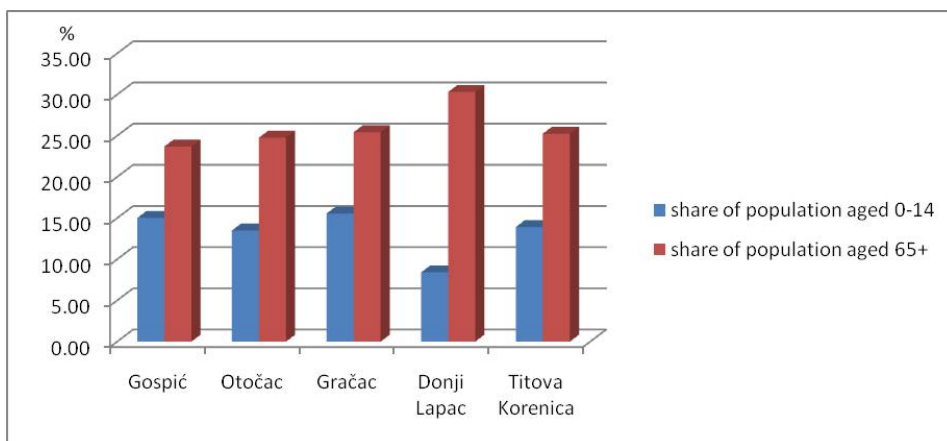


Figure 4. Share of young aged and elderly 2011

Also, unfavorable age structure affected the men and women ratio. According to 2011 Census, masculinity rate is 998 (998 men/1,000 women). Among the municipalities with a larger share of men, Donji Lapac, Lovinac, Perušić and Gračac stand out. The sex ratio of the working-age contingent of the population (15–64) is such that the rate of masculinity is 1,143, while in the contingent of the population aged 65 and over, the rate of masculinity is 735.

Ethnic Structure

In the early 20th century, the ethnic structure of population matched the structure of the population according to religious affiliation. In 1900, 48.7% of the Roman Catholics and 51.2% of the Orthodox Christians lived in Lika (Statistical Yearbook of the Croatian and Slavonian Kingdom, 1913). The population of the Catholic religion was mainly in Gospić, Perušić, Otočac and Brinje municipalities, while the Orthodox made majority in the municipalities of Gračac, Donji Lapac, Udbina and Korenica.

Among the many structural characteristics of the population of Lika, the consequences of the war in the nineties were mostly reflected in the changes in the ethnic structure of the population. Due to the lack of data and problems with comparability, the 1991 and 2011 Census data were used for the analysis of the ethnic structure. Forced war migrations were caused by ethnic reasons, which were shown in data on changing share of the individual ethnic groups in the population. Changes in the ethnic composition are mostly reflected in the change of the share of Croats and Serbs in the total population of this area. According to

the 1991 and 2011 Census, in most municipalities, the share of Croats increased while the percentage of Serbs decreased (Figures 5 and 6).

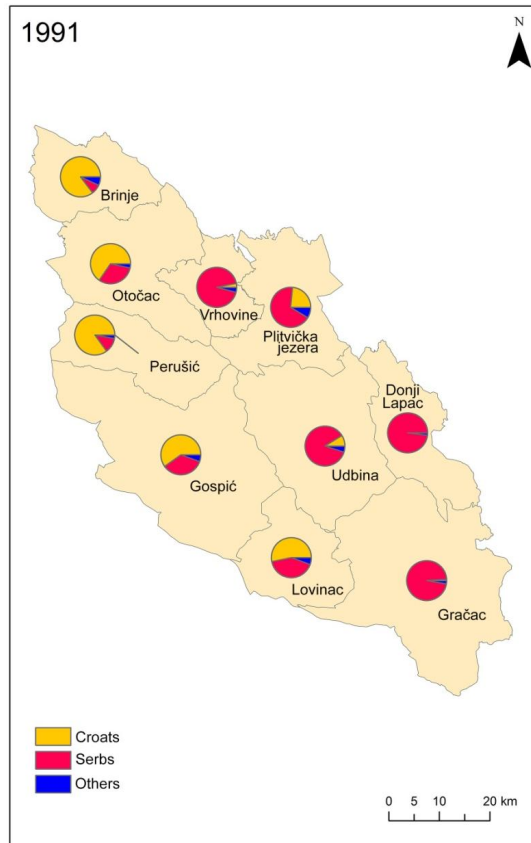


Figure 5. Share of Croats and Serbs in total population of Lika, 1991

In Gospić the share of Serbs was reduced from 34.6% (1991) to 4.7% (2011), in Otočac municipality from 31% (1991) to 7% (2011), while the share of Croats in Gospić increased from 59.9% (1991) to 93% (2011), in Otočac from 65% (1991) to 91% (2011). The largest decrease in the number of Serbs was registered in Gračac municipality, 96% (1991) to 45% (2011), while the share of Croats in this municipality increased from 1% (1991) to 53% (2011). Significantly, the increase in the share of Croats in these municipalities was enhanced by the group

of the population from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was after the war massively settled in this area².

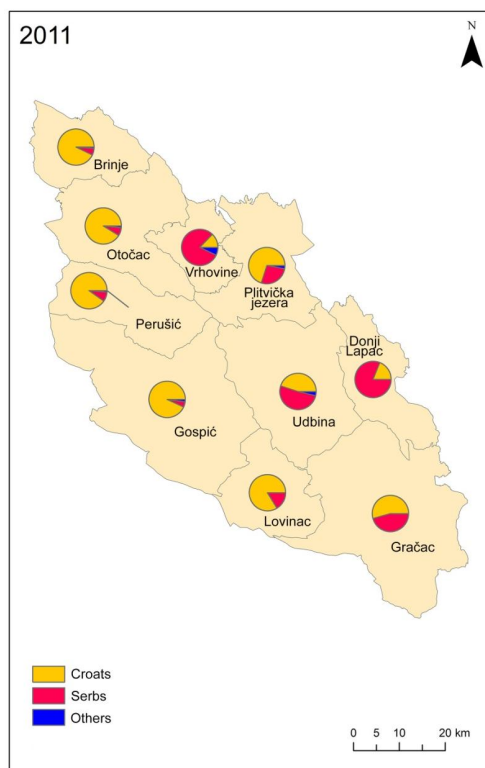


Figure 6. Rate of Croats and Serbs in total population, 2011

According to the 2011 Census, the municipalities with Serbian majority were Donji Lapac (80%), Vrhovine (80%) and Udbina (51%). As a methodological note, it is necessary to emphasize that from the former municipalities Korenica and Gračac, mainly inhabited by Serbs, separate municipalities Plitvička jezera and Lovinac were created, where, afterwards, the majority was the Croatian population (the Law on Territorial Organization in 1992).

Conclusion

Unfavourable demographic characteristics of the population in Lika are the result of poor, almost non-existent economic development, lack of large urban

²According to the data of Bureau for Exiles, Returnees and Refugees, Lika region is settled with 1 145 refugees mostly from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

centers which would provide better living and working conditions and prevent permanent emigration from this area. Therefore, emigration can certainly be emphasized as the most important demographic characteristic of this area. It continued throughout the 20th century, with special emphasis on the beginning of the 21st century, where in almost all municipalities in Lika the number of total population has decreased by more than a half. Weak economic development has been the main reason for emigration from this region, especially emigration of young and working-age population. During the process of deagrarianization, large urban settlements (Gospić, Gračac, Otočac) did not have the basic infrastructure which was the basis for attracting people.

Intensive emigration has left profound effects on the demographic structure, primarily on the age and sex structure of the population. The loss of the young population contingent and the increasing share of the elderly have reflected adversely on the natural growth of the population.

Factors that have also significantly contributed to the decrease in the total population are war losses during the First and Second World War, agrarian colonization, temporary work/stay abroad, mainly in western European countries, etc. In conditions of poor economic circumstances (lack of industry), high unemployment and the lack of youth employment, consequences of war (in the nineties) necessarily have caused the exodus of the area.

Demographic analysis of the population of Lika indicates that: process of depopulation has affected all municipalities (since late 19th century); war has caused significant changes in the ethnic composition of the population and the decreased share of Serbian population as opposed to the increased share of Croatian population in all municipalities.

The authors have concluded by this thorough analysis of the total population, natural and migration changes and certain structures of the population (age-gender and ethnic) that the war in the nineties has devastated the Lika region. The fact is that almost all municipalities in this region have had the population decrease of about 50% or more, which indicates that the population still living in these areas is not the sufficient potential for the demographic revitalization of Lika. It is expected that all these ongoing unfavorable demographic processes will continue and that the majority of the settlements in the Lika municipalities are threatened with extinction.

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