

**Southeast European Demographic Overview I.
Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia**

Délkelet-európai demográfiai körkép I.
Bulgária, Horvátország, Románia és Szerbia

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Abstract: Southeast Europe faces depopulation: low birth rates and large-scale emigration foreshadow a dire image for the region's demographic future. Family support and demographic incentives launched to increase fertility rates have not shown tangible results yet, while significant emigration to Western Europe suggests deeper structural problems. The first part of the analysis surveys the demographic trends in Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia.

Keywords: demography, depopulation, emigration, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Serbia

Összefoglalás: Délkelet-Európa elnéptelenedéssel néz szembe: az alacsony születési arányszám és a nagy arányú elvándorlás drasztikus képet fest a térség demográfiai jövőjéről. A termékenységi mutatók növelésére bevezetett családtámogatási és demográfiai ösztönzők egyelőre nem mutatnak kézzelfogható eredményeket, a Nyugat-Európába történő jelentős kivándorlás pedig mélyebb, strukturális problémákra enged következtetni. Az elemzés első része Bulgária, Horvátország, Románia és Szerbia demográfiai trendjeit tekinti át.

Kulcsszavak: demográfia, elnéptelenedés, kivándorlás, Bulgária, Horvátország, Románia, Szerbia

INTRODUCTION

Low birth rates, mortality figures above the European Union (EU) average, and high levels of migration in Southeast Europe are leading to unprecedented, exceptionally rapid aging and depopulation. In terms of demographic trends, declining fertility rates in parallel with significant migration flows posed a challenge even in the period of late socialism. Since then the phenomena has become even more severe, and the international community does not have an adequate policy or best practice to address it. Furthermore, the current demographic changes are not only a problem for the region, the EU must also pay attention to the economic and political consequences of these demographic imbalances, which go far beyond Southeast Europe.

Although the region has a long tradition of migration to Western Europe in terms of employment, this did not cause a problem as long as birth rates compensated for emigration. During the last few decades, however, demographic indicators in Southeast Europe have resembled those in developed countries (low birth rates and an aging society) while, on the other hand, they also display the specificities of developing states (high emigration rates). While Western European countries can compensate for these negative processes with immigration, this is not the case in

Southeast Europe: immigrants are either inactive workers returning from the West or coming from neighbouring countries but with a good chance of also moving on to Western Europe. It is particularly worrying that a large proportion of emigrants come from the young, foreign language-speaking, highly educated population. Based on these aspects, the first part of the analysis examines the demographic situation in Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia.

BULGARIA

Bulgaria's population growth began to decline early on: between 1989 and 2020, the population dropped by 22.5 percent (2 million people). According to the World Bank [DataBank](#), Bulgaria has realized the fifth highest decrease in population in the world after Latvia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lithuania, and Georgia.

While the decrease in birth rate that began in 1925 is in line with the general trend of demographic transition, the process was greatly accelerated by the 1989 regime change and the ensuing economic crisis. The Bulgarian [GDP](#) fell by 9 percent in 1990, by 14 percent in 1997, while [inflation](#) was constantly increasing. After a 914 percent rise in inflation in 1997, the Bulgarian lev was devalued and pegged to the Deutsche Mark. Bulgaria then reached its lowest fertility rate ever (1.09) but improved somewhat in the following years due to the fact that those born in the 1970s were entering parenthood. According to Eurostat data from 2019, the [total fertility rate](#) in Bulgaria is currently 1.58, which is above the EU27 average (1.53). It should be noted, however, that the country's birth rate continues to decrease, although this does not impact all major ethnic groups equally. A relatively higher birth rate of Roma people compared to Bulgarians can be deduced from [census](#) data: compared to 1992, by 2011¹ the Bulgarian population had decreased by 22 percent, while the number of Roma had increased by 4 percent.

The demographic crisis is further exacerbated by the exceptionally high mortality rate resulting from an aging society and caused by low living standards, high unemployment, and inadequate access to medical care. In 2019, the Bulgarian [mortality rate](#) was 15.5 (which is the highest number in the EU27). This rate is even worse among the rural population (21.6): in some provinces (Gabrovo, Montana, Pernik, Vidin) it even reaches 30. Moreover, Bulgaria has the lowest [life expectancy at birth](#) in the EU (75.1 years, while the EU27 average is 81.3 years) and the second highest [infant mortality rate](#) after Romania (5.6, the EU27 average is 3.4). Although no specific statistics are available, it can be assumed from the regional data that the latter two figures reflect the prevailing problems of the Roma minority.

1 The last census was conducted in Bulgaria in 2011, and only census figures contain specific data on ethnic groups.



The significant decrease in the population, however, is due to continuous and high-scale emigration rather than to the decreasing birth and fertility rates. According to the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (*Национален статистически институт*), the population decline is caused by a negative natural increase (52%) and a negative balance of net migration (48%). Between 1989 and 2002, roughly 715,000 people left the country, which was mainly caused by the regime change and the economic crisis. Half of the emigrants were between the ages of 20 and 35, with 75 percent of them having completed secondary or higher education. As the culmination of the so-called “[Bulgarisation](#)” policy in 1989, around 350,000 Bulgarian Turks were persecuted across the border to Turkey, which is more than a third of the total Turkish population of Bulgaria (900,000 people). Half of those who emigrated returned within a short period of time, although they emigrated again in the 1990s in several smaller waves due to the collapse of the Bulgarian economy. According to the Bulgarian census of 1992, 800,052 Turks lived in Bulgaria, but by 2011 this number fell to 588,318.

Although EU accession in 2007 did not have a significant impact on emigration, the end of the opt-out period concerning employment in 2014 changed this picture. In 2010, 308,089 Bulgarian citizens were registered in [EU+EFTA](#) Member States, while this number was 811,990 by 2020², most of them living in Germany (342,211) and Spain (122,785). In addition to emigration, immigration should also be mentioned, although it is not as significant as emigration. The largest immigrant communities in Bulgaria are the Russians (33,176) and the Ukrainians (11,773); these communities arrived predominantly during the communist era. The third significant group is represented by Syrians (14,573), who settled in Bulgaria for business purposes after the regime change, since the Syrian network had already existed in communist times through educational mobility programs. Additionally, between 2007 and 2019, nearly 80,000 Macedonians were granted Bulgarian citizenship, and their number is constantly increasing: 3,619 in 2018, 5,628 in 2019, and 9,098 in 2020. However, applicants for citizenship mainly leave for Western Europe due to the more favourable working conditions, and it is not clear how many of them actually stay in Bulgaria. Bulgaria [does not recognize](#) the existence of a “Macedonian” identity and language and handles Macedonian emigrants as strategic backup as “potential Bulgarians”, making it easy for Macedonians to apply for Bulgarian citizenship.

The family support system is the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (*Министерството на труда и социалната политика*). The core of the family support system is the family allowance, which is a monthly payment until the children complete their high-school studies. In addition, regardless of the family's financial situation, each family receives a one-off financial benefit at childbirth. Mothers with at least 12 months of employment are entitled to 410 days of

2 In 2019, 883,600 Bulgarians living in EU+EFTA Member States were registered, with the number for 2020 significantly lower due to Brexit (in 2019, 102,345 Bulgarians lived in the United Kingdom).

maternity leave, during which time they are entitled to 90 percent of their gross pay. According to Eurostat [data](#), in 2018, Bulgaria spent 10.38 percent of total social benefits on family support (the EU27 average is 8.45%). If we look at the [share](#) of family support expenditure as a percentage of GDP, Bulgaria (1.7%) is close to the EU27 average (2.2%). In [absolute value](#) Bulgaria provides 136 € per inhabitant as family support, which lags behind the EU average (672 €).

If net migration continues according to the current trend, Bulgaria's population could stabilize around 6 million according to optimistic estimates. However, the realistic approach of the Bulgarian Statistical Institute estimates the population of Bulgaria at 4.9 million by 2080, which is also in line with Eurostat's forecast.

CROATIA

Although the population of Croatia was growing in the Yugoslav era, largely owing to internal migration, since the independence of the country it has displayed negative tendencies. The country's population was almost 4.8 million in 1990, but it has decreased to the level of the 1960s, to barely over 4 million. According to [Eurostat's forecast](#), this number will keep decreasing, to under 3.4 million by 2050 and 3 million by 2080.

Croatia belonged to the wealthier states of Yugoslavia, but the wars that led to the dissolution of the federation caused serious damage to its economy and population. Many fled from the wars: while Croats and other non-Serb inhabitants from dominantly Serb-inhabited areas had to flee in the beginning (more than 400,000 people), later Serbs (around 120,000) had to run away from the Croatian Army. In the meantime, ethnic Croats arrived from neighbouring states, particularly from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), also fleeing violence. As a consequence of the conflict, the population of Croatia has become relatively homogenous. According to the 2011 census, 90.4 per cent of the population is Croat, 4.4 per cent is Serb, and the rest of the minorities together, including Hungarians, are under one per cent. [The average age was 41.7](#) in 2011, which was mainly determined by the average age of the Croats. The average age of Albanians and the Roma was much below that, but because of their low share within the population, it did not make a major difference in the statistics.

Similarly to Bulgaria, one of the main reasons behind the deteriorating demographic situation in Croatia is the decreasing number of births. Except for the first couple of post-war years, the number of deaths has been higher than that of births since 1990. The total fertility rate was 1.47 in 2019, which is also under the EU27 average. Since 2015, the natural change of the population has been an annual decrease of over 14-16,000, which is partly an outcome of the low fertility rate and partly that of the high level of emigration of young people.



Unlike Bulgaria before the regime change, massive emigration characterized the Yugoslav era, as many migrated to the USA, Canada, South America, New Zealand, and Australia, as well as to the member countries of the European Communities (particularly to Germany). The 2008-09 financial and economic crisis stopped the economic growth that had started at the beginning of the 2000s and caused a lasting decline in the economy and a rise of unemployment. These push factors encouraged growing migration, which grew even stronger after EU accession in 2013. Currently, the most popular destination is Germany, where 20,432 migrated in 2016, 29,053 in 2017, 21,732 in 2018, and 19,290 in 2019. Austria and Ireland follow Germany in this respect. The main sources of immigration are neighbouring BiH and Serbia. From BiH more than 22,000 people arrived in 2018 and 2019, from Serbia this number is over 7,600. A large number of Croats live in both countries, BiH in particular, many having dual citizenship. It must be noted that immigration numbers were outstanding in 2018 and 2019, and they do not represent a general tendency that would counterbalance emigration. Only a small number of people return from those who emigrate abroad.

Within the government, previously the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy (*Ministarstvo za demografiju, obitelji, mlade i socijalnu politiku*), and currently the Ministry of Labour, Pension, Family and Social Policy (*Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskoga sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike*) deals with family policy. The government established the [Demographic Revival Council](#) (*Vijeća za demografsku revitalizaciju Republike Hrvatske*) in April 2017 to support the adoption and implementation of a strategy that would replace the demography policy of 2006. Among the first measures made in November 2017, the beneficiary circle of childcare benefits and allowances was expanded (by increasing the income threshold), and the capacities of early childcare institutions were also increased. Croatia spends 9.04 percent of its social benefits on family support, which is 1.9 percent of GDP. In absolute value this means 243 € per inhabitant provided as family support. Nonetheless, as it was pointed out at [the demography conference of the European Economic and Social Committee](#) in November 2019, even if the number of births increases thanks to the increased level of childcare support, there is no guarantee that they will stay in the country as they grow up. They can still leave Croatia for better employment opportunities in wealthier countries despite the increasing investment and expenses of the motherland.

Because of the current tendencies, Croatia annually loses as many inhabitants as that of an average town. Within the remaining population, the ratio of the age group of over-50s is increasing, although the working age group is still dominant. This critical situation receives much attention from the right-wing government, and Zagreb handles it as a priority in its domestic and [foreign political discourse](#). It lobbied strongly for Croatia to get the portfolio of demography in the new European Commission, and this topic was also a priority of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2020.

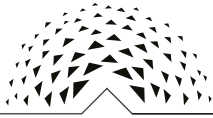
ROMANIA

The Romanian National Institute of Statistics (*Institutul Național de Statistică*) identifies the same important elements regarding the Romanian demographic challenges: a decline in births, and emigration. It is estimated that the population decreased from 23 million in 1990 to 17 million in 2020. The multi-wave emigration had a demographic effect mostly on the younger age groups. As a result of the significant emigration of citizens of childbearing age, the proportion of 0–15-year-olds and those over the age of 65 became the same in 2009 for the first time.

Natural reproduction in Romania, especially with the negative balance of emigration and immigration, shows an ongoing social crisis. Although the total fertility rate is 1.77, which is the highest among the analysed countries, and it has been growing steadily since 2013, it is still far from 2.1 to secure reproduction and cannot compensate for emigration. Undoubtedly, this development is related to an improving economic outlook and the growth of real wages. The overall population decline, including mortality surplus over births, is estimated to have been at around 80,000 people per year in the last decade. In addition to population decline, it is also worth considering the increase in life expectancy at birth. In 1990, this figure was 69.5 years, in 2015 it was 74.8, an increase of 5.3 years in the 25 years since the change of regime. Although in 2019 the Romanian life expectancy at birth rose to 75.6, it is still the second lowest after Bulgaria in the European Union and remains far below the EU27 average.

The other cause of the social crisis is the net migration rate: Romania loses around 60,000 people every year. There is also significant internal migration: about 500,000–600,000 people from the Regat region (Moldova, Muntenia, Dobrogea) have moved to Transylvania in the last 30 years, as well as migrated from the countryside to the city. Romania is less urbanized than the European average and has strong traditional values in terms of religiousness. Neither the family support system nor religious attitudes can be detected as the main cause of regional development differences in demographic processes – cultural aspects seem to be playing a decisive role instead.

Long-term emigration and foreign employment are significant problems, but the Romanian economy is less affected: remittances are as much a part of the system as low unemployment, which is thus “reduced” by the departure of young people to Western Europe. Officially the country currently has 19.5 million inhabitants, but millions of them live abroad, mainly in Spain, Italy, and Germany. Apart from Transylvania and Bucharest, the economy in Romania, especially in rural areas, hardly moves, which is why emigration is to be expected to continue in the long run. All this, together with the growing negative reproduction, is hurtling the state towards a demographic crisis.



In Romania, despite the demographic situation, a policy similar to the Hungarian family policy and support system can only be discovered in traces.³ The social support policy, which belongs to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (*Ministerul Muncii și Justiției Sociale*), means that a fixed amount is given to families on a monthly basis to support raising children, but on the basis of need, which is assessed by social workers. If necessary, social institutions provide in-kind assistance to children. The family policy support system, which costs 1.5 percent of the GDP (providing 158 € per inhabitant as family support), is also essential because 10% of children in rural areas go to bed hungry in the evening⁴. One quarter drop out of school, and one or both parents of 100,000 children work abroad, so they grow up alone or with relatives. The current government program mentions this issue and takes it into account in its development [project](#).

SERBIA

Both having been republics of Yugoslavia, the demographic characteristics of Croatia and Serbia hold many similarities. Serbia's population decline began as early as the 1970s, as the *baby boom* period ended in the more developed parts of Yugoslavia, including Serbia, the earliest. Until the late 1990s, however, the state was able to compensate for its declining population in central statistics with the relatively high fertility rates of the less-developed (southern) republics and Kosovo⁵. Similarly to Croatia, as a result of urbanisation and in the absence of language barriers, a significant number of people migrated from the rural parts of Yugoslavia to Serbian urban-industrial centres during these decades. Paradoxically, the wars that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia (1991–1995; 1998–1999) did not alter Serbia's demographics significantly. During the armed conflicts, about 600,000 Serbs from Croatia and BiH relocated to Serbia; this is roughly equal to the number of people leaving Serbia during that period. Kosovo Serbs, on the other hand, do not appear in the change of the total population, as, given the official Serbian position, their movement took place within the country.

In recent decades, the Serbian natural population has also declined drastically, and Serbia's population is decreasing by about 40,000 annually. The rate of change in the total population of the country, except for the Belgrade region, shows a

- 3 Somewhat similarly, the state supports young couples' acquisition of a home. This is called the "first home" program, under which the state either takes on a certain amount of the price of the home or provides a guarantee in the case of a loan.
- 4 Considering this, it is understandable why the "milk and croissant" program, which was created in 2002 due to deficiencies in school meals, is so popular.
- 5 Within the Serbian republic in Yugoslavia, Kosovo, similarly to Vojvodina, enjoyed an autonomous status. As a result, statistical datasets from Kosovo were included together with Serbia.

negative trend, and a similar process can be observed in the case of minorities as well. Regarding population change, Serbia is facing the same problem as the previous countries: although low birth rates in line with an aging society are challenging, the real problems are caused by the high rate of emigration and low rate of immigration. Comparably to Croatia, migration is not a new phenomenon and goes back decades in Serbia as well. Furthermore, in the 1990s, citizenship was granted to Serbs in several European countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden) under a simplified procedure. As a result, Serbs leaving the country today arrive in well-organised communities of family and friends; this extensive social network also facilitates emigration. With the adoption of international standards in 2002, citizens who have been abroad for more than a year are not included in national statistics. According to the United Nations Development Program, about 51,000 Serbian citizens [leave](#) the country each year.

As in the previous case studies, emigration is fundamentally driven by economic considerations, and the process has resulted in the outflow of young, skilled labour. In the 1990s, the armed conflicts, the UN (economic) sanctions, and high inflation triggered emigration. After the period of Serbia's democratic transition in 2000, the economy has shown steady growth; however, the country's ever-growing foreign deficit did not lead to sustainable economic development. In addition, the differences between city (notably Belgrade and Novi Sad) and countryside have become more pronounced. Even though Serbia maintains good political and economic relations with Eastern great powers, the direction of emigration remains Western-oriented (towards EU Member States and North America). On the part of Western European states, emigration is also facilitated by the above-mentioned guest worker (*gastarbajter*) past, brain drain, and EU integration (more precisely, visa liberalisation in 2009). Germany remains a particularly attractive destination for Serbians: from 2020, it is easier for highly qualified or skilled non-EU citizens to [obtain](#) a residence permit for the purpose of employment. Remittances are still significant, accounting for 13 percent of Serbia's GDP in 2010, but at the same time, they have been heavily exposed to global economic trends affecting host countries.

Serbia has so far failed to provide incentives to repatriate young, skilled citizens. Moreover, immigration to Serbia does not equal or make up for the large-scale emigration from the country. Immigrants do not usually come from the working age group but from former guest workers. Thus Serbia, unlike Western Europe, has no "migration hinterland": citizens of former Yugoslav republics, in the absence of access to Western Europe, seek employment primarily in Slovenia or Croatia, rather than in Serbia. In recent years, the majority of people coming from China tend to come to the country for shorter periods of time, for employment purposes only.

The aim of the Serbian leadership is to stimulate the number of births so that the current fertility rate (1.52) can reach 1.85 in the next 10-15 years. To achieve this goal, the Parliament in 2018 adopted the "Strategy of Birth Promotion"



([Strategija podsticaja rađanja](#)) and issued amendments to the “Law on Support for Families with Children” ([Zakon o izmenama Zakona o finansijskoj podršci porodici sa decom](#)). These documents constitute the legal foundations for the current family support system and childbearing policies. Families can receive financial benefits until their children are under the age of nineteen. At the birth of the child, parents are entitled to a one-off financial benefit, although only available until the fourth child. The state also supports mothers on maternity leave: childcare benefits are provided for one year of maternity leave. In the case of three or more children, the maximum period of maternity leave increases to two years. Despite the newly adopted strategies, Serbia spends the least on family support among the four countries, making up only 6.46 percent of the social benefits and representing 1.2 percent of GDP. In absolute terms the country provides 76 € per inhabitant in family support.

Due to these immigration and emigration trends, as well as the steady decline of the total population, Serbia essentially loses one town every year. According to the prediction of the World Bank, Serbia’s population will [shrink](#) to 5.8 million in the next three decades. It is not clear at this point what results the Serbian government’s family policy reforms of 2018 will bring.

CONCLUSION

The highlighted demographic incentives for family support introduced by governments to reduce and halt population decline are broadly in line with the EU average, with Serbia lagging significantly behind. On the other hand, it must be noted that these countries are far from the EU average in absolute value in terms of the amount of family support provided. If we, however, look at the share of family support expenditure as a percentage of GDP, they are close to the EU average. It can thus be concluded that Southeast European countries allocate a significant amount of their revenues to supporting families. Compared to other European states in the medium and long term, the desired results will not be achieved by solely focusing on increasing the number of births through financial incentives. Changing negative trends would also require labour market reforms and properly addressing the economic causes of emigration. An important aspect would be to attract young, skilled human capital already living abroad.

For all the examined countries, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia, the same statement stands: migration characteristics resemble those of underdeveloped countries, while the demographic indicators are in accordance with the figures in developed countries, and deeper and structural problems can be deduced from current trends, especially from migration data. Immigration would be a solution to curbing and balancing the demographic crisis, but there is no tradition of immigration to Southeast Europe; it functions only as a transit region in terms of migration. The emigration of highly skilled, young labour is already causing labour

shortages, which, while improving unemployment rates, is adversely affecting FDI inflows to the region. Emigration, however, is not only due to material reasons: a poor level of education, social and other services, a lack of trust in political institutions, and a high level of corruption play key roles as well. For the most part, countries in Southeast Europe consider neighbouring states as demographic reserves: Romania takes Moldova, Bulgaria takes North Macedonia, and Croatia takes BiH as backup, while Serbia has no particular “migration hinterland”. At the same time, workers arriving in these EU Member States often leave for Western Europe due to more favourable working conditions, and these countries in Southeast Europe are only considered stepping-stones. Thus, emigration will continue to be a major problem, as it can only be alleviated by immigration to a limited extent.



APPENDIX

Table 1.
Total population of Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia, 1989-2019 (Eurostat, 2021).

	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania	Serbia
1989	8 986 636	4 761 965	23 111 521	N/D.
2000	8 190 876	4 497 735	22 455 485	7 527 952
2008	7 518 002	4 311 967	20 635 460	7 365 507
2009	7 467 119	4 309 796	20 440 290	7 334 937
2010	7 421 766	4 302 847	20 294 683	7 306 677
2011	7 369 431	4 289 857	20 199 059	7 251 549
2012	7 327 224	4 275 984	20 095 996	7 216 649
2013	7 284 552	4 262 140	20 020 074	7 181 505
2014	7 245 677	4 246 809	19 947 311	7 146 759
2015	7 202 198	4 225 316	19 870 647	7 114 393
2016	7 153 784	4 190 669	19 760 585	7 076 372
2017	7 101 859	4 154 213	19 643 949	7 040 272
2018	7 050 034	4 105 493	19 533 481	7 001 444
2019	7 000 039	4 076 246	19 414 458	6 963 764

Table 2.
Total fertility rates, 2008-2019 (Eurostat, 2021).

	EU 27	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania	Serbia
2008	1.57	1.56	1.55	1.60	1.40
2009	1.56	1.66	1.58	1.66	1.44
2010	1.57	1.57	1.55	1.59	1.40
2011	1.54	1.51	1.48	1.47	1.40
2012	1.54	1.50	1.51	1.52	1.45
2013	1.51	1.48	1.46	1.46	1.43
2014	1.54	1.53	1.46	1.56	1.46
2015	1.54	1.53	1.40	1.62	1.46
2016	1.57	1.54	1.42	1.69	1.46
2017	1.56	1.56	1.42	1.78	1.49
2018	1.54	1.56	1.47	1.76	1.49
2019	1.53	1.58	1.47	1.77	1.52