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RECENT MARRIAGE AND CHILDBEARING TRENDS IN CROATIA AND SLOVENIA: A COMPARATIVE REVIEW

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The average number of children per woman in childbearing age in both, Croatia and Slovenia is less than two.

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Recent marriage and childbearing trends in Croatia and Slovenia: A comparative review

ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the marriage and childbearing trends in Croatia and Slovenia from 1985 to 2017. We made a comparative review of several indicators related to marriage and childbearing trends: mean ages of women at first marriage and first childbirth, birth rates, births within and outside marriage, total fertility rate, tempo-adjusted fertility rate, age-specific fertility rates, and marriage rate. The analysis is based on the official statistical data provided by the statistical offices of both countries and Human Fertility Database. Many of the indicators, including the birth rate, total fertility rate and age-specific fertility rate, are somewhat more favourable in Slovenia than in Croatia. One of the major differences between the two countries is that in Slovenia the connection between marriage and childbearing is not as nearly significant as in Croatia.

KEY WORDS: population geography, marriage, childbearing, fertility, birth rates, Croatia, Slovenia

Najnovejši trendi sklepanja zakonskih zvez in rojevanja na Hrvaškem in v Slovniji: primerjalna študija

POVZETEK: V članku avtorici proučujeta trende sklepanja zakonskih zvez in rojevanja na Hrvaškem in v Sloveniji med letoma 1985 in 2017. Primerjata različne s tem povezane kazalnike: povprečno starost ob sklenitvi prve zakonske zveze in rojstvu prvega otroka, nataliteto, število rojstev znotraj in zunaj zakonske zveze, celotno stopnjo rodnosti in stopnjo poročnosti. Analiza temelji na uradnih podatkih statističnih uradov obeh držav in na podatkovni bazi Human Fertility Database. Vrednosti več kazalnikov, vključno z nataliteto, celotno stopnjo rodnosti in starostjo ob rojstvu prvega otroka, so za Slovenijo nekoliko ugodnejše kot za Hrvaško. Ena večjih razlik med državama je ta, da v Sloveniji povezava med zakonsko zvezo in rojevanjem še zdaleč ni tako pomembna kot na Hrvaškem.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: geografija prebivalstva, zakonska zveza, rojevanje, rodnost, nataliteta, Hrvaška, Slovenija

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1 Introduction

The collapse of the state socialist system in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in unprecedented social and economic changes (new political and social freedoms, transition to market economy, income inequalities and unemployment, expansion of university education, social stratification, etc.). Those changes affected, among other things, the marriage and childbearing trends. Although there are numerous similarities regarding economic, social and family trends in CEE after the collapse of the socialist system, there are also some important differences. Even before 1990s, birth control and fertility decline of the first demographic transition generally started sooner in western, more industrialized and in economically more developed parts of the CEE (Nejašmić 2002; Sobotka 2011).

Demographic data indicate that already in 1960s, the birth rates in many former socialist countries were around or below 14 per 1,000 and the total fertility rate (TFR) fell below 2.1. The underlying causes of those changes were intensive industrialization, migration from rural to urban areas, increased employment in non-agricultural sectors (particularly the employment of women), aspirations to a better material standard of living and double income, etc. (Wertheimer-Baletić 1999). Nejašmić (2002) distinguished three groups of countries regarding the stage of demographic transition in early 1990s: 1) countries in which demographic transition was not completed (Albania, Poland, Romania, Estonia, Macedonia, Moldova, Slovakia and FR Yugoslavia/Serbia and Montenegro), 2) countries that were about to reach the post-transitional stage (Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine), and 3) countries in post-transition (Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Croatia and Slovenia).

The end of the 20th century in post-communist countries was marked by a number of longstanding changes in all domains of life, including rapid expansion of university education in most countries and newly emerging lifestyles, which were not easily compatible with children and family. Consequently, the result was postponement of marriage and childbearing to higher ages. The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century were marked by extremely low total fertility rates, which subsequently started to recover in most countries (Sobotka 2011). According to Sobotka (2011), the intensive shift of fertility and partnership formation toward higher ages were crucial for the fertility and marriage declines in the 1990s, but they were not given the appropriate attention in public debates and in the media. Regardless of numerous similarities in economic, social, and family trends in CEE after 1989, the region became extremely differentiated in terms of economic prosperity, social stability and economic transformation (Sobotka 2011; Nejašmić 2002).

At the beginning of the 21st century Croatia and Slovenia were faced with historically low birth rates and total fertility rates. These two neighbouring countries were once a part of the same country and were both among the most developed republics of former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (Magaš 2013), and their demographic developments were, in some aspects, similar, but the recent demographic trends show some significant differences. Analysis of the official population statistics provided by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia reveal that one of the basic demographic differences today between these two countries is that Slovenian population has been increasing since late 1990s, while the Croatian population has been decreasing constantly since early 1990s. In this respect (along with the level of birth rates, share of births outside marriage, and immigration trends) demographic trends in Slovenia are more similar to those in western and northern European countries, while Croatia is more similar to many of the post-communist European countries.

2 Theoretical framework and literature preview

The recent changes in reproductive behaviour and marriage patterns in Croatia and Slovenia can be analysed through the prism of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory. The basic idea of the SDT is that industrialised countries have reached a new stage in their demographic development, which is characterised by the extensive control over fertility. Namely, the couples tend to have one or two children, the fertility levels declined below the replacement level, and the childbearing is being postponed (Van de Kaa 2002). Lesthaege (2007) argues that the SDT also brings a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage and the disconnection between marriage and procreation. In Croatian case, the extensive control over fertility, low fertility levels and postponed childbearing have been present for several decades, but there is

still a significant connection between marriage and procreation. Similar characteristics have been observed in Slovenia too, but the connection between marriage and procreation is not as nearly significant as in Croatia.

In the last three decades, the decreasing number of births and falling birth rates have been the crucial determinants of demographic development in Croatia. At the beginning of each year, upon the publication of vital statistics for the previous year, the newspapers publish articles pointing out the »demographic catastrophe« referring to the decreasing number of births and marriages, low total fertility rate and increasing age of the mother at first birth. However, that issue has not been addressed enough in Croatian scientific literature, particularly recently. Most of the existing researches were focused on natural population change in general (e.g. Nejašmić 1986; 2000; Klempić and Lajić 2005), and two papers dealt with extramarital births in Croatia (Mrđen 1997; Pavić 2014). There is only one paper dealing with regional characteristics of birth rates in Croatia in the period 2001–2003 (Nejašmić, Bašić and Toskić 2008). Despite the fact that Croatia has had below-replacement total fertility rate since late 1960s, that issue has been investigated more thoroughly only recently, particularly the relation between women's employment and fertility (e.g. Akrap 2011; 2013; 2014; Akrap and Čipin 2011a; 2011b; Čipin 2010; 2011).

Similarly, in Slovenia, most of the researches discuss the birth rate trends, falling birth rates and population replacement. The research on marriages, age at first birth and at first marriage is scarce. Birth rates and fertility changes in Slovenia were discussed by Boh (1988), Stropnik and Šircelj (2008), Jakoš (2009), Malačič and Sambt (2014). The fertility issues in Slovenia were more thoroughly investigated by Josipovič, who focused on geographical factors of fertility (2003), general fertility-related issues in Slovenia (2004), the effects of migration on the changes in fertility behaviour (2006), the connections between the parents' education and fertility (2007), and the changes in birth rate and fertility levels (2014). There are also several researches dealing with fertility levels and parents' education (Černič Istenič 2007; Knežević Hočevar 2007; Stropnik 2007; Šircelj 2007). Vertot and Križman (2009) analysed the demographic situation in Slovenia through birth and death rates, and migration. Marital and extramarital births in Slovenia were discussed by Vodeb-Bonač (1991), Kričaj Korelc (2005), Strehovec (2012), and Kuhar (2013), who analysed the underlying causes of postponed childbearing and marriage, as well as the decreasing number of marriages and increasing trend of extramarital births. Kerbler (2015) analysed the spatial perspective of population ageing in Slovenia, and identified the falling birth rates as one of the most important causes of population ageing.

In both countries, the researchers emphasized the need for implementing population policies (e.g. Friganović and Šterc 1993; Akrap 2005; Wertheimer-Baletić 2005a; 2005b for Croatia, and Boh 1999; Stropnik and Šircelj 2008, and Malačič 2015, for Slovenia). Meanwhile, little has been done in that respect and the negative trends are continuing more rapidly than ever, prompting the need for further research.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comparative review of marriage and childbearing trends in Croatia and Slovenia through the analysis of the number of births, birth rates, extramarital births, total fertility rates, marriages, and mean age of the mother at first childbirth. The analysis encompasses the period from 1985 to 2017 in order to get a better insight into the trends before the collapse of the state socialist system and after.

3 Data and methods

The research relies on the official statistical data provided by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia for the period from 1985 to 2017. However, there are some differences in data collecting methodology in these two countries, but they do not have a significant impact on the final results. The data on tempo-adjusted total fertility rate were taken from the Human Fertility Database, but the time coverage is not equal for both countries – the data for Slovenia covers the period from 1984 to 2016, and for Croatia from 2003 to 2016. Accordingly, it is possible to compare this indicator from 2003 onward. The tempo-adjusted total fertility rate was calculated by using the Bongaarts-Feeney method (Bongaartsa and Feeney 1998). Due to the lack of data on completed cohort fertility for Croatia, it was not possible to make the comparison between the two countries.

The basic difference between population data collection in Croatia and Slovenia is that Slovenia has population register and Croatia does not, i.e. Croatia relies on population and housing censuses. The Slovenian population register is updated regularly, while Croatia conducts population censuses every ten years. Until

2001, all Croatian citizens were included in the total population, regardless of their actual residence, but from 2001, if they had been living outside the country for 12 or more months, they were not included, but the foreign citizens who lived in Croatia for 12 or more months were included (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2013). The Slovenian methodology changed as well – the definition of total population changed three times. Until 1995, total population included persons with permanent residence in Slovenia. From 1995 until 2008, the population of Slovenia encompassed the citizens of the Republic of Slovenia with permanent residence in Slovenia, but excluded those that had been abroad for more than three months and gave notice of their departure. On the other hand, it included the foreigners who had registered permanent residence in Slovenia. As of 2008, a new definition has been used, and it is based on the usual residence concept (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia 2018). For this reason, the population data is not always completely mutually comparable, but it does not have a significant impact on the analyses in this paper, particularly on marriage, mean ages and fertility indicators. The main method used in this paper is collection, analysis, visualisation and interpretation of the statistical data.

4 Results

The beginning of the 21st century in Croatia and Slovenia was marked by two divergent demographic processes – in Croatia, the population has been decreasing continuously, while the Slovenian population has been increasing and is at a historic high (Figure 1).

In early 1980s, Croatia entered the post-transitional stage of demographic transition and since early 1990s it has been characterised by constant natural decrease, which, coupled with intensive emigration, led to depopulation. Slovenia also entered the post-transitional stage in early 1990s, and was faced with natural decrease at the turn of the 21st century, but it recorded a period of gradual recovery afterward, which subsequently resulted in slight natural decrease at the very end on the analysed period (in 2017). However,

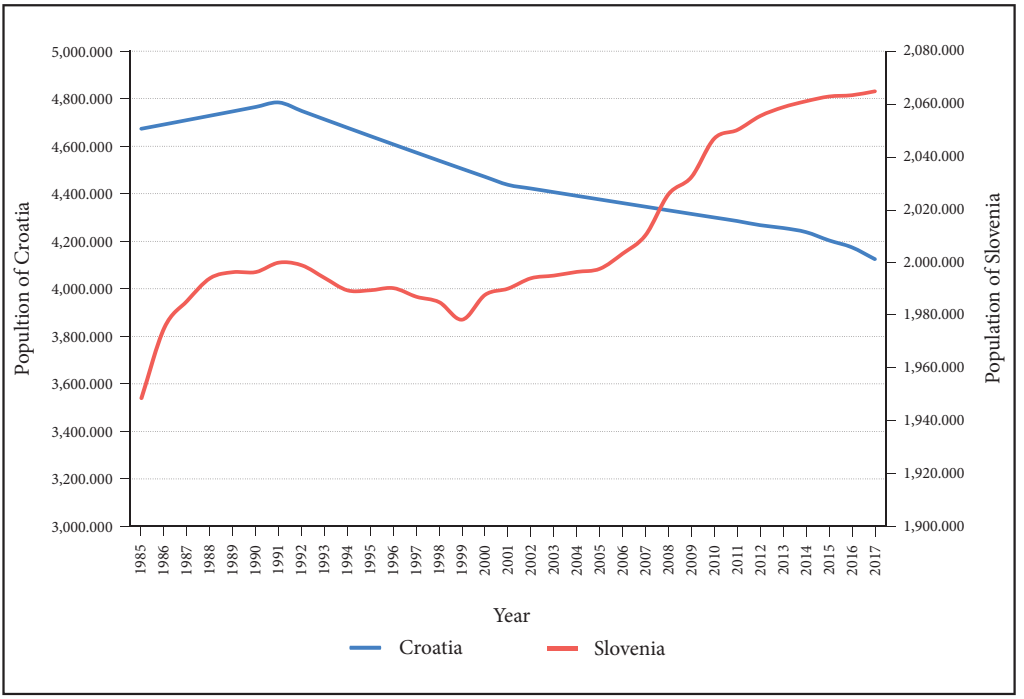

Figure 1: Population of Croatia and Slovenia, 1985–2017.

the most striking difference between the two countries in the analysed period is in international migration. Namely, Slovenia was, mostly, an immigration country, while Croatia was emigrational (Malačič and Sambt 2014), which is ultimately evident in their recent demographic development – population increase in Slovenia and population decrease in Croatia. Differences in immigration and net migration rates are closely related to the level of socio-economic development and Slovenia's accession to the EU in 2004 (Kogovšek Šalamon 2018). One of the factors that made the existing demographic situation in Croatia even more difficult during the 1990s was the Croatian War of Independence – its negative effects were particularly evident in the reduced number of marriages and births and in intensive emigration during and after the war.

Analysis of the birth rates from 1985 to 2003 indicate that both countries recorded a downward trend. The only exception in Croatia is a short-term baby boom after the Croatian War of Independence (in 1996 and 1997). After that, birth rates started increasing and peaked in late 2000s, before recording the downward trend again (Figure 2). Slovenia recorded a short-term baby boom in the second half of the 2000s, because somewhat more numerable generations born in late 1970s and early 1980s reached the reproductive age (Josipovič 2014). The birth rates in Croatia were, in most years, higher than in Slovenia up to mid-2000s, but from that point on, Slovenia has had higher birth rates than Croatia. An interesting fact is that throughout the whole analysed period, Slovenia had a higher share of women in child-bearing years than Croatia. This leads to conclusion that lower birth rates in Slovenia were the result of lower fertility rates. However, in both countries, the number of women in child-bearing years has been decreasing – from 1981 to 2017, their number in Croatia decreased by 22.4%, and in Slovenia by 7.7%. The reason for the lower intensity of decrease of women in child-bearing ages in Slovenia was immigration (Josipovič 2006). Namely, Slovenia has had positive net migration and notable immigration of women in child-bearing ages, while Croatia has been characterized by negative net migration and intensive emigration of population. Birth rate levels have had a significant impact on natural population change. In early 1990s, the natural population change in both countries reached the negative values, and in Croatia the downward trend continued,

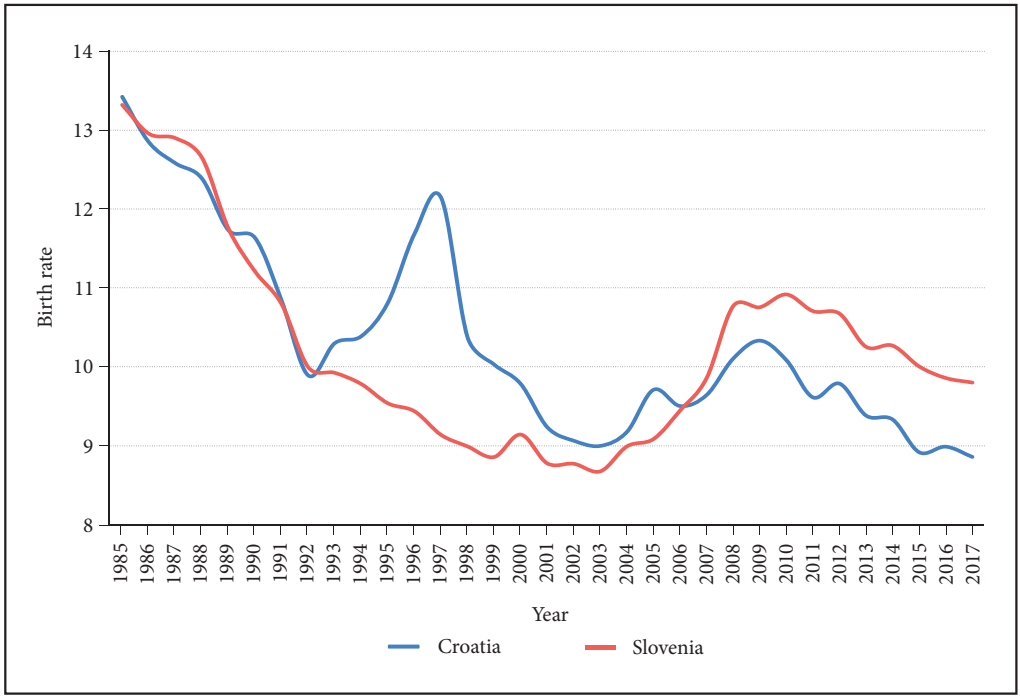

Figure 2: Birth rates in Croatia and Slovenia, 1985–2017.

reaching the history lowest value (in peaceful times) in 2017 (–4.1‰). On the other hand, the lowest values in Slovenia were recorded in late 1990s and early 2000s, and from 2006 to 2016 the natural population change was positive primarily due to the increase of the birth rates. However, the recent falling birth rates resulted in natural population decrease.

Another most evident difference between the two countries is related to births within and outside marriage (Figure 3 and Figure 4). At the beginning of the analysed period, in 1985, the share of births outside marriage in Slovenia was 19.1% and in Croatia 5.9%, while at the end, in 2017, that share in Slovenia reached 57.5% and in Croatia 19.9%.

This clearly shows that there is still a firm bond between marriage and childbearing in Croatia, and according to the data provided by Eurostat, Croatia is among the European states with the lowest share of births outside marriage. On the other hand, in Slovenia, the share of births outside marriage surpassed the share of births within marriage in 2007, and today, Slovenia is among the four countries in Europe with the highest share of births outside marriage (the top three countries being Iceland, France and Bulgaria). According to Oinonen (2008), the main reason for high proportion of extramarital births in Slovenia is that cohabitation was largely accepted even during the Communist era. It is also evident that the secularization has been more prominent in Slovenia than in Croatia (cf. Smrke and Uhan 2012).

Total fertility rate (TFR) is one of the basic indicators of reproduction. The onset of below-replacement fertility in Croatia can be situated in mid-1960s, while in Slovenia it occurred some 15 years later, at the very end of 1970s. However, throughout the last two decades of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, TFR was higher in Croatia than in Slovenia. During the 1980s, both countries experienced a decline of TFR below 1.80, heralding an era of long-term subreplacement fertility (Sobotka 2011). Additionally, both countries reached the historically low TFR in 2003 (1.33 in Croatia, and 1.20 in Slovenia), with the gradual recovery in the following years (Figure 5). From 2008, TFR has been higher in Slovenia than in Croatia, and it is currently at 1.62 children per woman.

Since total fertility rate is a synthetic rate that does not take into consideration other demographic determinants of fertility than age, it is advisable to complement it with tempo-adjusted total fertility rate and cohort fertility data in order to get a better insight into the fertility levels. However, there is no data on cohort fertility data for Croatia, so it is not possible to make a comparison with Slovenia, and the tempo-adjusted total fertility rate for Croatia is only available since 2003. Nevertheless, the data reveal that, with the exception of 2015, the tempo-adjusted total fertility rate in Croatia has been higher than in Slovenia (Figure 6). The tempo-adjusted total fertility rate is a better indicator for the average number of children per woman than the observed TFR, because it takes into consideration the birth order specific changes (i.e. its calculation requires only age-specific fertility rates by birth order), while the TFR is affected by tempo effect (i.e. by distortions due to changes in the timing of births) (Bongaarts and Feeney 1998). It is evident that the both countries have experienced »postponement transition« (shift of childbearing to older ages) (Sobotka 2017), but if we eliminate the tempo effect, the tempo-adjusted rate reveals that the fertility rates are somewhat more favorable in Croatia. However, it is not possible to draw concrete conclusions due to short time span covered. It is interesting to note that the tempo-adjusted total fertility rates are very often higher than total fertility rates. According to Josipovič's (2014) calculation for Slovenia, from 1954 to 1979, the fertility rates were overestimated by +0,2 to +0,5 children per woman, and from 1980 onwards, they were underestimated by –0,3 to –0,4 in the period from 1991 to 2004, and by –0,2 from 2005.

Changes in fertility levels are closely connected to the timing of marriage and childbearing. In both countries, there has been a significant increase in the average age of women at first marriage and at first childbirth (Figure 7 and Figure 8). At the beginning of the analysed period, the women in both countries entered the first marriage at the age of 22.8, and gave birth to the first child at the age of 23.8 (in Croatia) and 23.2 (in Slovenia). In the course of the following 32 years the average ages in Croatia increased to 28.6 and 28.9, and in Slovenia to 30.1 and 29.4. The major difference between the two countries is that in Croatia the average age at childbirth has been constantly higher than the average age at first marriage, which indicates that marriage usually precedes childbearing. On the other hand, in Slovenia, there is no particular gap between the two average ages, and approximately in the last two decades, the average age at first marriage has been higher than at first childbirth (with the exception of 2009 and 2010, when the age at first childbirth was slightly higher).

It is evident that in the analysed period there was a significant shift of the timing of childbearing from early 20s to late 20s and early 30s, and the age-specific fertility rates decreased, particularly in the most

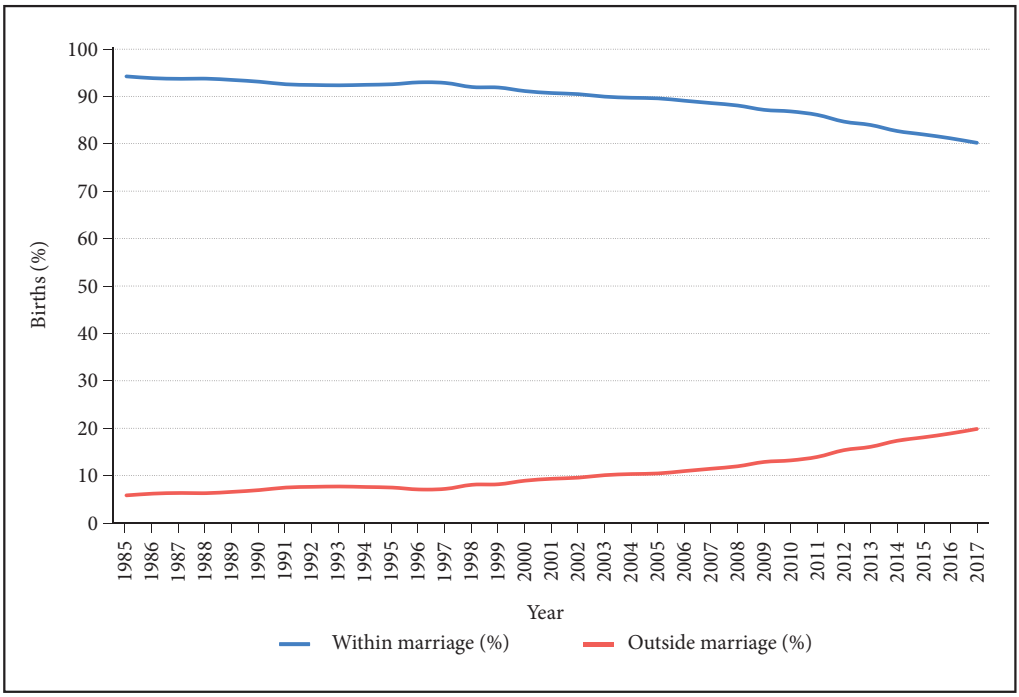

Figure 3: Births within and outside marriage in Croatia, 1985–2017.

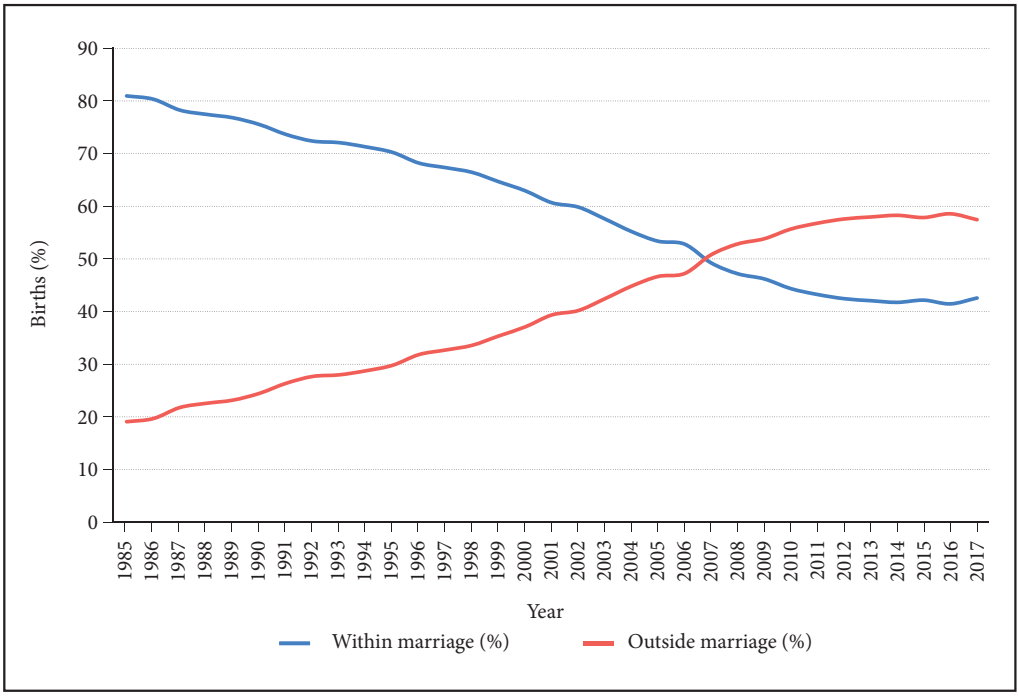

Figure 4: Births within and outside marriage in Slovenia, 1985–2017.

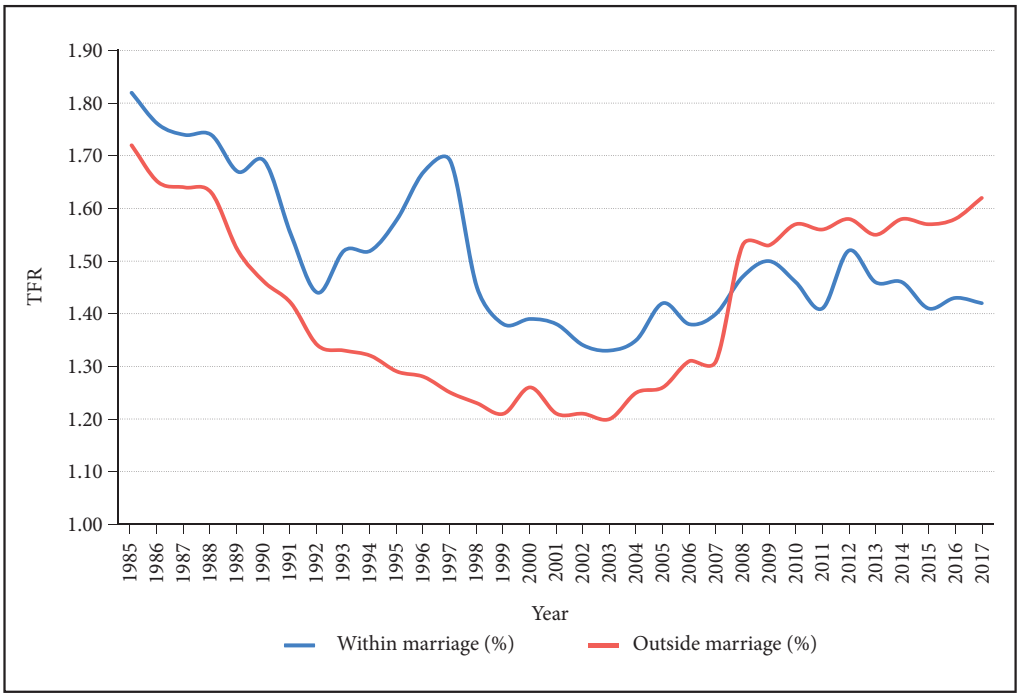

Figure 5: Total fertility rate (TFR) in Croatia and Slovenia, 1985–2017.

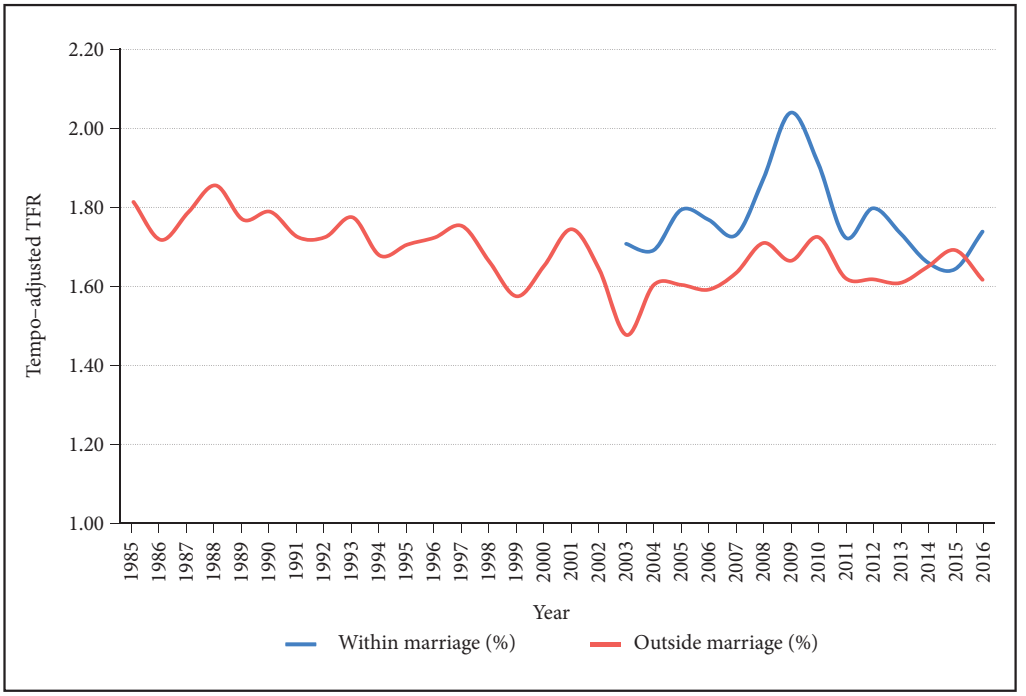

Figure 6: Tempo-adjusted total fertility rate in Croatia (2003–2016) and Slovenia (1985–2016).

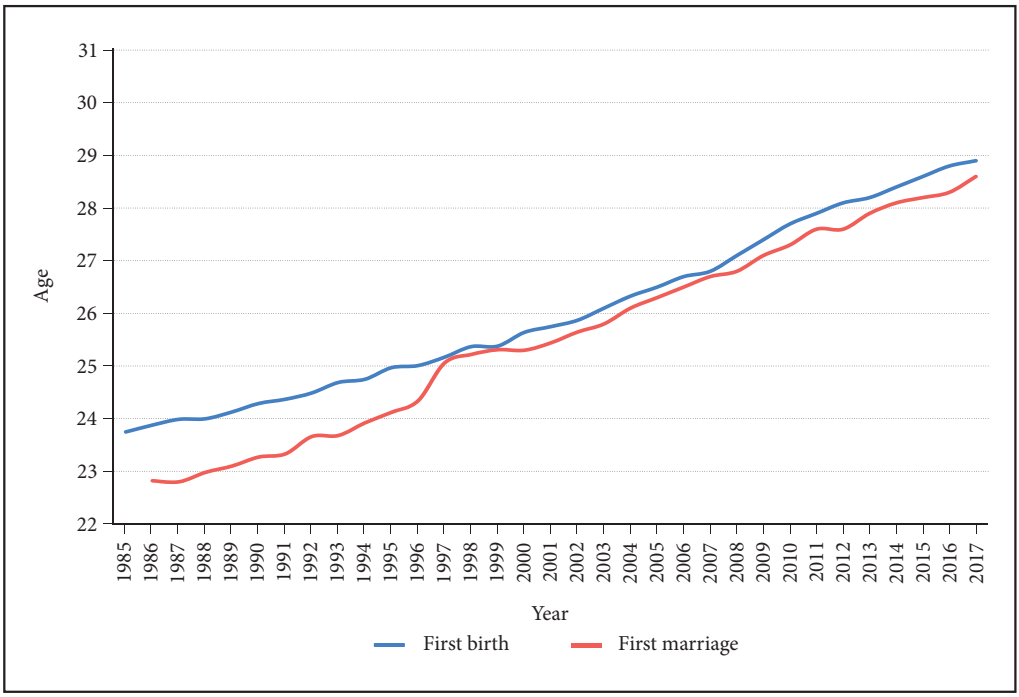

Figure 7: Average age of women at first marriage and at first childbirth in Croatia, 1985–2017.

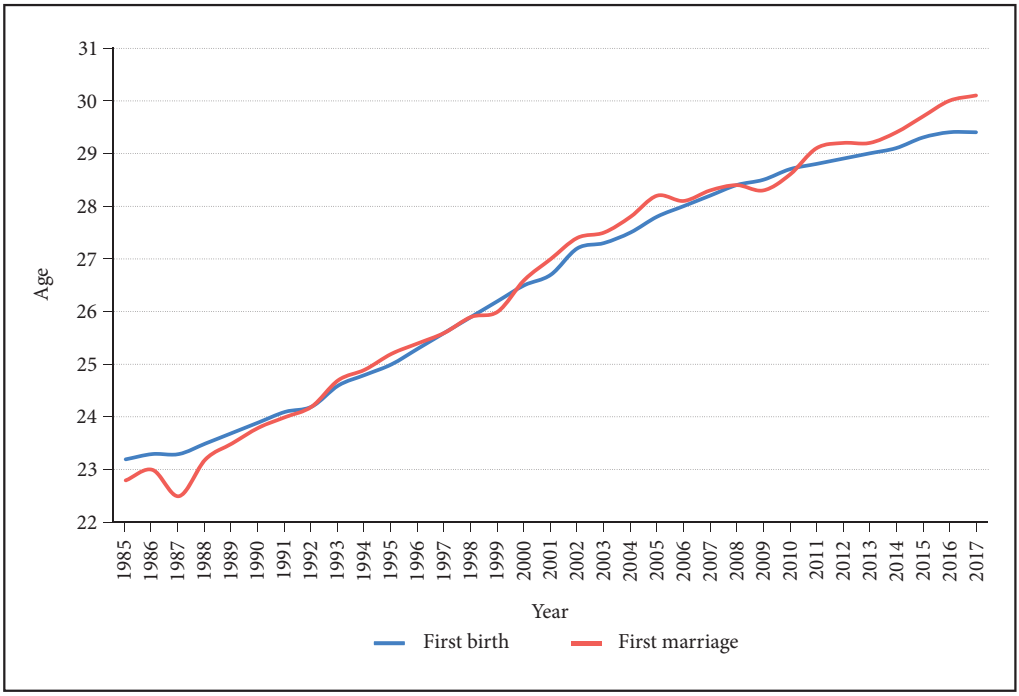

Figure 8: Average age of women at first marriage and at first childbirth in Slovenia, 1985–2017.

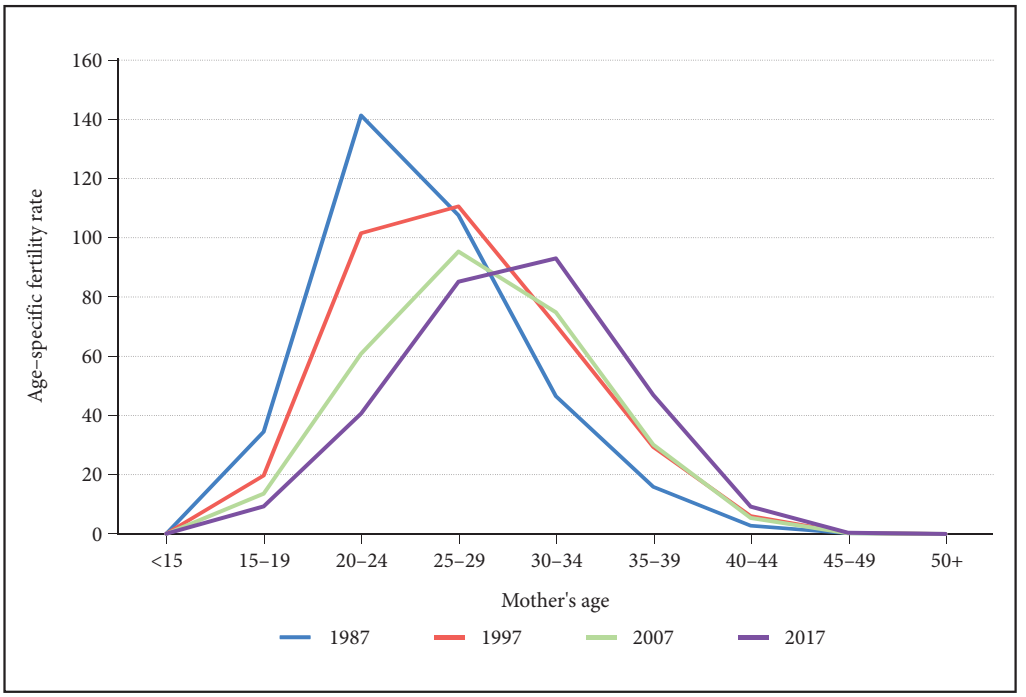

Figure 9: Age-specific fertility rates in Croatia in selected years.

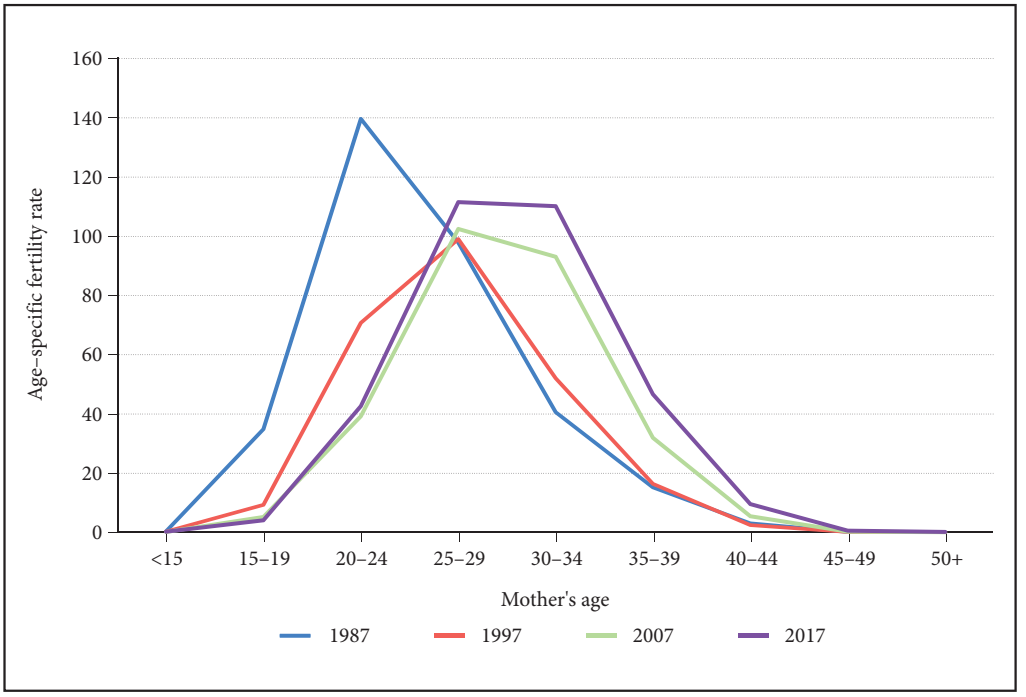

Figure 10: Age-specific fertility rates in Slovenia in selected years.

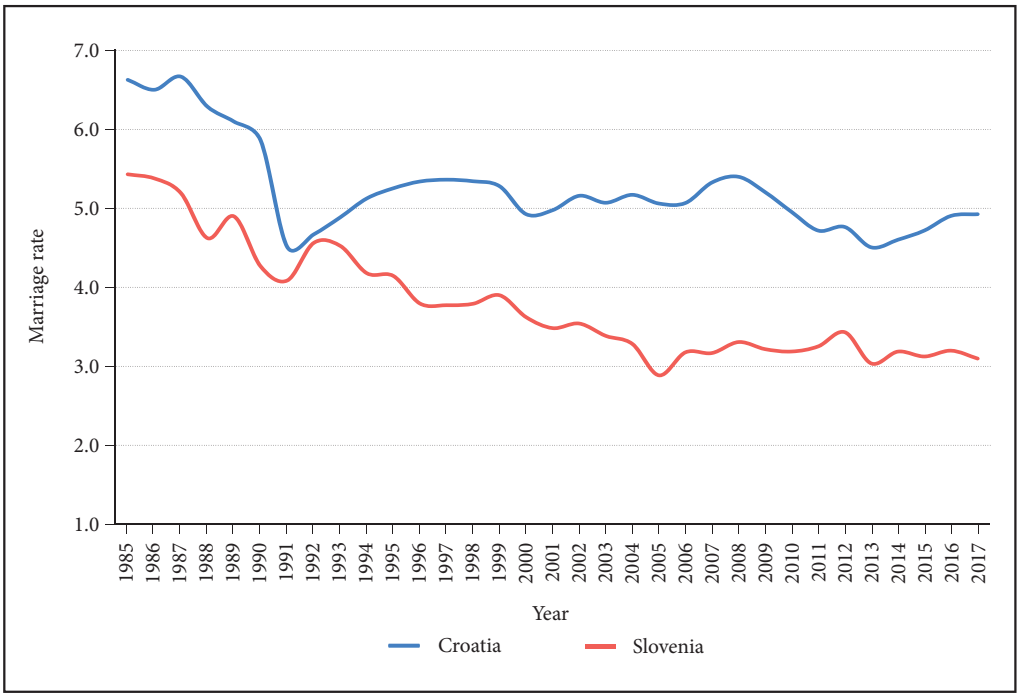

Figure 11: Marriage rates (marriages per 1,000 inhabitants) in Croatia and Slovenia, 1985–2017.

fertile age group (Figure 9 and Figure 10). In 1987, the age-specific fertility rates were the highest in the age group 20–24 (141.2 in Croatia and 139.6 in Slovenia), but in 2017 the rates in that age group decreased to 40.6 in Croatia and 42.6 in Slovenia. Moreover, in 2017, the age group 20–24 had the lowest fertility rate in comparison to the age groups 25–29, 30–34 and 35–39.

In 1997 and 2007, in both countries the highest age-specific fertility rates were recorded in the age group 25–29, but in 2017 the fertility in Croatia was the highest in the age group 30–34. On the other hand, in Slovenia the highest fertility was still in the age group 25–29 (but only slightly higher than in the age group 30–34; 111.5 and 110.1, respectively), and it even increased in comparison to the previous two years. The conclusion that the timing of childbearing in both countries shifted to older age groups is further supported by the fact that from 1985 to 2017 the fertility in the age group 15–19 was decreasing continuously, with simultaneous increase of fertility among the women aged 40–44.

The analysis of marriage rates indicates that the importance of marriage as a union is decreasing. In the analysed period, the marriage rates decreased, but there is still a difference between the two countries. In Croatia, the rate is currently at almost five marriages per 1,000 inhabitants, and in Slovenia just over three marriages per 1,000 inhabitants (Figure 11). From 1985 to 2017, the number of marriages in Croatia decreased by 34.4% and in Slovenia by 38.7%.

5 Discussion

In most cases, childbearing was traditionally associated with marriage, and extramarital births comprised only a small portion of total live births. According to the church and other historical records in Europe, from 16th to 19th century, the non-marital childbearing (»illegitimacy ratio«) ranged from approximately 2 to 7 per cent in most countries (Laslett, Oosterveen and Smith 1980, cited in Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). Throughout the 20th century, marriage was a dominant form of union between a man and a woman, and

1960s and 1970s were the »golden age of marriage« across many Western nations (Kiernan 2001), as well as in Croatia (Mrđen 1997) and Slovenia (Stropnik and Šircelj 2008). In Slovenia and Croatia, the number of marriages started decreasing in mid-1970s and late-1970s, respectively. The lower marriage rate in Slovenia can be attributed to the changes in attitudes toward traditional, religious and moral perception of marriage. Namely, the period after the Second World War was marked by significant changes – exclusion of the church from the schools, media and public life, better access to contraception, and cohabitation among the younger generations (Strehovec 2012). Another important factor is the fact that a significant number of young people continue living with their parents even after they complete their studies, thus postponing marriage and forming their own families (Kuhar 2013). In Croatia, that process started somewhat later, as the influence of the church and the religion has been stronger.

It is important to emphasize that the decrease in fertility level, as well as other changes in demographic behaviour, had started years or even decades before the political, economic, and social transition that started in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Stropnik and Šircelj 2008), which makes Slovenia and Croatia fairly different from most former socialist countries. Of course, it cannot be ignored that the political and economic transition in the early 1990s had a significant impact on demographic changes during the 1990s and early 2000s. Some of the most notable reasons for the significant fall in the number of live births and birth rates were definitely intensive industrialisation and urbanisation, which influenced the reproductive behaviour of the population resulting in lower fertility rates (Breznik 1988, cited in Josipovič 2004; Černič Istenič 2009). Namely, the period from early 1960s to early 1980s in Croatia and Slovenia were characterised by intensive industrialisation (Vrišer 1992; Nejašmić 2008), during which there was an increased demand for labour force, particularly in labour-intensive industries. Such demand prompted a significant emigration from rural to urban areas and the increase of women labour force. Additionally, women's educational and career aspirations increased.

The researches have shown that prolonged education contributes to postponing the childbearing (Liefbroer and Corijn 1999; Baizán et al. 2003; Lappegård and Rønsen 2005). The same trend can be observed in Croatia and Slovenia, too. Namely, the analysis of the number of women enrolled at higher education institutions in both countries has increased significantly since the mid-1980s (Stropnik and Šircelj 2008; Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Simultaneously, the birth rates and fertility decreased significantly. Active participation in labour force also contributed to delaying marriage and childbearing. Additionally, due to economic insecurity in post-socialist and transitional economies, there was a strong need for investing in one's own education and career thus postponing marriage and pregnancy (Čipin 2011). Although, at the national level, highly educated women in Slovenia generally have fewer children than the women with lower levels of education, a research conducted by Josipovič (2007) revealed that in some parts of the country the women with higher education tend to have more children than the women with lower level of education. On the other hand, a research conducted in Croatia by Čipin (2011) showed that the women who attained tertiary education had fewer children than women with elementary or secondary education, but their desired number of children is higher than in women with lower levels of education.

Although there is no unanimous scientific evidence that links declining fertility and reduced number of live births with the periods of economic recession (Lanzieri 2013), there is evident decline in the number of live births in Croatia since the beginning of the economic recession in 2008, and similar trends were observed in a number of other European countries, particularly in Southern, Eastern and Central Europe (Goldstein et al. 2013). The changes in reproductive behaviour in that period have been prompted by increased unemployment of young adults and economic uncertainty. For the same reason, young people tend to postpone marriage. However, it is also important to emphasise the negative effects of emigration from Croatia, which has intensified since the beginning of the crisis, particularly because most of the emigrants have been young adults in their reproductive age. In conclusion, we can say that Croatia has been faced with, as Lanzieri (2013) calls it, baby recession. Although the number of births and fertility rates have been declining since the mid-1980s, they have recently reached the unprecedented levels. The situation regarding childbearing has been alarming for the past 25 years, and in 2006, the National Population Policy was adopted in Croatia (Nacionalna populacijska politika 2006). The policy largely focused on introducing favourable housing policies for the young people and families with small children, better employment opportunities, reducing emigration of young population, at family allowances, tax reliefs, on full-time employment and flexible working hours, particularly of mothers, better child care opportunities etc. Despite the policy, little has been done (Akrap 2019), and the number of live births each year has been decreasing constantly.

The state also failed to mitigate the negative impact of economic conditions on fertility by introducing family policies that might have softened the adverse effects of the crisis.

On the other hand, such decline in the number of births after 2008 was not present in Slovenia. Some of the most notable reasons are less pronounced effect of the economic crisis and immigration. Namely, as much as 73% of the women who have immigrated to Slovenia since 2000 are aged 20–39. Additionally, some of the family policies and measures in Slovenia probably yielded certain results, particularly those related to the mothers' labour market participation, maternity and paternity leave provisions, early childhood education and care, health care, housing etc. (Stropnik 2014). In the last few years, Croatia has recorded the lowest number of births ever, while the latest data on the number of births in Slovenia show that it is still above the all-time lowest recorded in 2003.

6 Conclusion

Although Croatia and Slovenia were once a part of the same state and, to an extent, experienced similar political, economic and social changes in that period, their demographic features have not been as similar in some respects. One of the major differences today is that Slovenia has had population increase since 2000, a Croatia has been depopulating since 1991. The population increase in Slovenia can be attributed to low, but positive natural population change and positive net migration. On the other hand, Croatia has been faced with a long-term negative natural population change and negative net migration. Another major difference is related to marriage rate and extramarital births – in Croatia, the marriage rate is higher and as much as 80% of the children are born within marriage, while in Slovenia, the marriage rate is lower, and the share of extramarital births is much higher than in Croatia.

As for the other indicators, the trends are more similar, but the birth rate, total fertility rate, and age-specific fertility rate are still more favourable in Slovenia. It is evident that the mean ages at first marriage and first childbirth have been increasing constantly, and the age at first childbirth is above 28 in Croatia and 29 in Slovenia. This can be attributed to prolonged education of both sexes, job insecurity and increasing real estate prices, which prevents the younger generation from leaving parental home earlier. Both countries are faced with great demographic challenges, and there is a strong need for introducing more effective policies and measures aimed at increasing the fertility levels, particularly by removing the obstacles that prevent the young people from having children earlier (this includes much better housing opportunities for young adults, more generous family allowances and tax reliefs, better child care system, part-time employment and flexible working hours, job security, etc). However, one must bear in mind that it will be difficult to achieve, considering the fact that the number of women in childbearing age has been decreasing.

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