



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:

A shortage in a number of new students enrolled at Croatian universities: the spill over of structural deficiencies on the Croatian educational system

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A shortage in a number of new students enrolled at Croatian universities: the spill over of structural deficiencies on the Croatian educational system

Summary

The Croatian public was surprised by the emergence of a large number of vacancies at Croatian universities. The cause of these 11,000 vacant enrolment places is multiple in its nature. Due to the very poor results in the summer term of the State Matura exams (graduate exams, supervised by the state's agencies, which are prerequisite for enrolment to faculties), a part of the public concluded that these poor results led to low enrolment figures. However, responsible representatives of the education system clearly distanced the problem of the devastating results of the State Matura exams from the problem of the high number of vacant posts at Croatian faculties. The minister of education stated that even if all the candidates had passed the State Matura exams and enrolled in higher education programs, there would still be around 6,000 vacant enrolment places at Croatian universities. In this way, the Ministry of Science and Education stated that the problem of vacant enrolments is much wider and more complex than the scope of the ministry can handle by itself. This message from the Ministry is twofold: firstly, the problem of vacant enrolment places at Croatian universities is the result of acute depopulation of Croatia, and, secondly, that some constituents of certain Croatian universities have abused the constitutionally guaranteed right of university autonomy, arbitrarily increasing from year to year enrolment quotas in order to preserve their own, particular material interests. All three aspects - poor State Matura results, arbitrary increase in enrolment quotas and acute depopulation of state territory - are highly devastating to the educational and overall economic system of Croatian society. This huge shortage of candidates at the State Matura exam and the emergence of a large number of vacant enrolment places at Croatian universities will necessarily produce a shortage of young domestic and high-quality labour force in some sectors of Croatian economy and produce structural unemployment among highly educated personnel on the Croatian market.

Introduction

In September 2019, the final rankings for the enrolment of candidates to the faculties of Croatian universities were published and the data shocked the public. More than 11,000 enrolment places at the faculties remained vacant, of which about 3,000 are at the most popular

University of Zagreb. This has not happened so far, which is why Minister of Science and Education Blaženka Divjak announced a detailed analysis of the situation and addressing the causes of the problem. She noted in advance that the problem of vacant enrolment places was multidimensional and that, even if all students and other high school graduates had passed the State Matura exam (graduate exams, supervised by the state's agencies, which are prerequisite for enrolment to faculties), about 6,000 enrolment places would still have been vacant. Minister's statement made it clear to the public that her department is not only responsible for the negative outcome of enrolment of candidates at the Croatian faculties, rather that there are wider negative trends that other actors from political and academic community must face. Surely, some negative phenomena in Croatian society cannot be stopped solely by the work and efforts of the Ministry of Science and Education (MZO), such as the phenomenon of acute depopulation of Croatia. However, in the last year the conflict between the MZO and certain constituents of certain universities has appeared regarding the size of enrolment quotas. The most famous case regarding enrolment quotas is the conflict between the Ministry and the Faculty of Economics and Business in Zagreb when the Faculty, with the approval of the Senate University of Zagreb, increased the enrolment quota of its studies by 60%. Also, there is a trend of worse results in the State Matura exams, where 2019 is the worst so far according to the criterion of the amount of students achieving negative grades. All of this deeply annoyed the public, as for the first time there is a clear drop in the number of applicants for enrolment at the Croatian faculties, which implies that soon there will be a shortage of young workforce for the Croatian economy and thus a gradual collapse of the entire system.

Poor Matura results and missing applicants

This year, the results of the summer term State Matura exams were extremely attractive to the public. The number of negative grades in the summer term from Mathematics and Croatian language and literature exams was over 8000. However, the number of applicants who got negative grades is smaller but still extremely problematic, especially in light of the fact that over 1000 high school students have failed these basic exams. The National Centre for External Evaluation (NCVVO) submitted a detailed report to the general public on the results of the summer exams in mid-July. In addition to all the negative phenomena, the report concluded that the education system, with all its components, should take responsibility for the results of the State Matura. At that moment, Minister Blaženka Divjak, who perceived that the evaluation of NCVVO was mainly aimed at her Ministry, did not let the public know that this wave of negative grades would hit the enrolment quotas of Croatian faculties, but reversed the entire

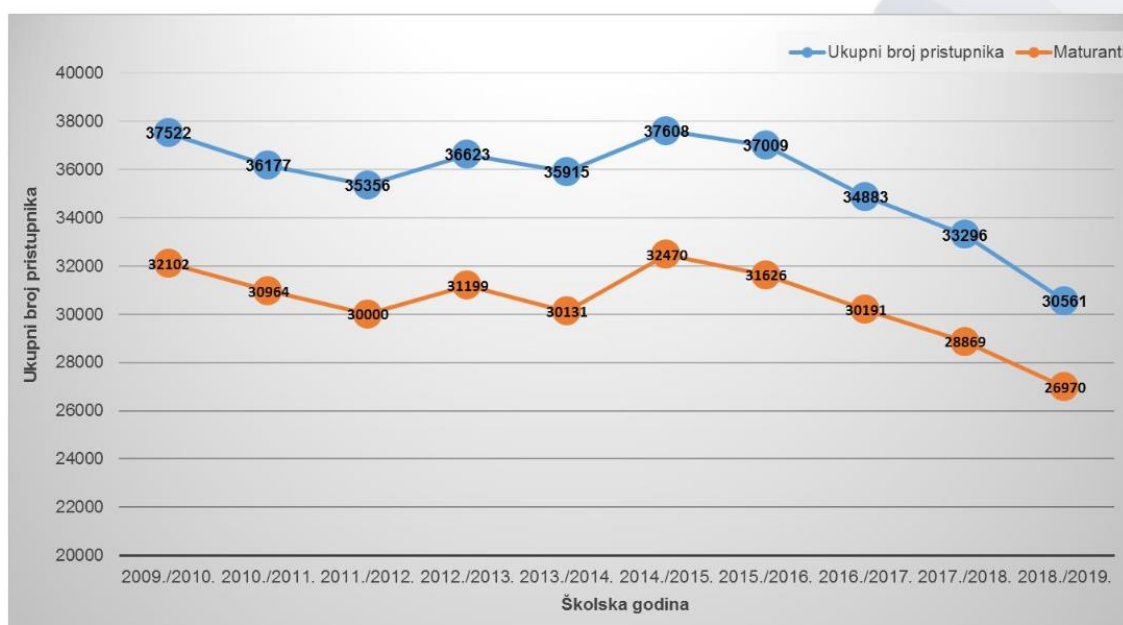
negative outcome of the applicants at the summer term of State Matura as a great indicator that the entire educational reform that the Ministry is implementing in the next school year all schools is necessary and desirable.

However, one piece of information provided by NCVVO graduates was passed by the public's radar, and later on, Minister Divjak would often refer to it in order to explain why there are so few students enrolled at Croatian colleges. There has been an acute shortage of applicants to the State Matura in recent years. From the 2015/2016 school year to the 2018/2019 school year, the number of applicants for the State Matura exams had severely declined about 7000 less applicants. This trend corresponds to the trend of acute depopulation of the entire nation on the Croatia's territory. Minister Divjak in addressing the media about the 11,000 vacant enrolment places explicitly replied that even if all the applicants had passed the State Matura exams and had, therefore, enrolled in Croatian higher education institutions, there would still be about 6,000 vacant enrolment places at Croatian universities.



Nacionalni centar
za vanjsko vrednovanje
obrazovanja

Pristupanja državnoj maturi



The graph presents changes in number of applicants of the State Matura exams during last ten years. The orange line indicates the number of graduates who have accessed the State

Matura exams and the blue line indicates the total number of applicants of the State Matura exams.

Source: NCVVO

School Year	Regular Applicants	Other Applicants	Total Applicants
2009/2010	32102	5420	37522
2010/2011	30964	5213	36177
2011/2012	30000	5356	35356
2012/2013	31199	5424	36623
2013/2014	30131	5784	35915
2014/2015	32470	5138	37608
2015/2016	31626	5383	37009
2016/2017	30191	4692	34883
2017/2018	28869	4427	33296
2018/2019	26970	3591	30561

Source: NCVVO

Acute depopulation of state territory is indeed a national problem and inevitably affects the entire education system. However, in the number of 11,000 vacant enrolment places at Croatian faculties, there is still another major social problem, alongside with the problem of acute depopulation and poor State Matura results: the problem of fictitious enrolment quotas. Specifically, some constituents of the universities increased their enrolment quota year after year in order to achieve and secure their particular material interests. The most famous example, but not the only one, is the case of the Faculty of Economics and Business in Zagreb (EFZG), which this year only increased its student enrolment quota by 60% (from 1610 possible enrolment places to 2545). These increases did not meet the needs of economists for the economy or the policies of the governments of the Republic of Croatia. It is purely about increasing enrolment quotas to raise money from future student tuition fees for the deserved and undeserved university professors' standard of living and other benefits. The constitutionally guaranteed autonomy of the university enables this socially destructive detachment of a part of the academic community that is devastating to both society and that same autonomy that provides all that harmful behaviour. Unilaterally increasing enrolment quotas, such as in the case of EFZG, not only arbitrarily subtracts public funds from the state budget, but also produces structural unemployment in society in the long run. For this reason, Minister Divjak had to respond to the arbitrary increase of the enrolment quotas of certain constituents of the

universities, because it is a breach of social responsibility, which all universities and all their constituents must comply with.

Conclusion

Taken into account, the phenomena of arbitrary increase in enrolment quotas at particular faculties in order to sustain their own material interests and the very poor results of applicants in the State Matura exams are severely harmful to the future economic situation of Croatian society. However, these two phenomena are small in magnitude in comparison to the occurrence of acute depopulation of the entire state territory. Institutions can operate in full compliance with the law and fairly, but if people leave the country and are not replaced by some new labour force, it is difficult to stabilize the overall system. An analysis of the State Matura 2019 results found that 7,000 applicants were fewer than 5 years ago, nearly 20% less than in 2014. The emergence of 11,000 vacant enrolment places at Croatian faculties was inevitable, but it could have been somewhat slightly less negative if it had reacted on time and not had counted in academic circles solely on their own small, material interests. Due to arbitrary and fictitious enrolment quotas at the faculties of Croatian universities, structural unemployment among the highly educated workforce will continue to be produced. Also, the lack of investment in the education system and the lack of substantive education reform will continue the downward trend in the quality of education and learning outcomes in students. All this will produce further negative educational and economic effects, which will continue to create the social emergence of a negative downward spiral from which society will only be able to escape by radical political, economic and social changes.