



# Weekly Briefing

## **Croatia social briefing:**

### **The Social Stratification in Croatia Amid COVID-19 Crisis**

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# **The Social Stratification in Croatia Amid COVID-19 Crisis**

## **Summary**

*This paper deals with social stratification in Croatia amid the COVID-19 crisis and recent earthquakes that hit Zagreb and Sisak-Moslavina counties in March 2020 and late December, respectively. With more and more concerns surrounding the availability of vaccines, people are getting frustrated with the behavior of certain public figures which only provokes the well-known thesis that not everyone has to follow the same rules.*

## **Introduction**

Over the past couple of weeks, the main topic in Croatia was the distribution of vaccine against the COVID-19, with the Government, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, trying to ensure the public that there will be no shortages of vaccine and that every citizen in danger of getting infected with the virus, in addition to the rest of the older population, will eventually be taken care of. However, during the last two weeks, we have witnessed more and more cases in which people who did not belong to the groups defined as “at risk of getting infected” and who are not exactly in the twilight of their lives, have managed to get the vaccine based on their position within social stratification or thanks to the informal “ties” with the members of the Civil Protection Directorate and other political figures. Perhaps the most recognized example is Davor Boras, the rector of the University of Zagreb, who, in his own words, happened to find himself with his wife at the right time in the right place just to get two vaccines that were left spare. Paradoxically, just as the Prime Minister is trying to assure that there are no shortages of vaccines, the rector was so lucky to get two spare vaccines that would otherwise be thrown away. Furthermore, last week, when the restrictions were not yet lifted, several judges were filmed at the private party with the former mayor of the city of Split, Željko Kerum. One would ask what is the message behind it, how it will affect the rest of us who have to follow the law and respect the measures imposed to contain the virus. Unfortunately, there are more and more situations when one’s position in social hierarchy enables him to “follow his own rules” and to differ from the rest of us.

## **The Current Situation Surrounding the COVID-19 Crisis**

This happens to be provoking especially in times when people's mental health is heavily compromised due to COVID-19 related concerns and the consequences of two major earthquakes that struck Croatia in 2020. Many people have lost members of their families, relatives, jobs, homes, and such kind of behavior from those in power or those who previously held executive positions whether on a national or local level does not stimulate nor inspire people to believe that everyone has equal opportunities and that we all stand equal before the law. On the contrary, people are getting discouraged even when listening to somewhat contradictory arguments from members of the Civil Protection Directorate on current measures with many entrepreneurs already proclaiming them as discriminatory. Therefore, everything that happened in 2020 and early 2021 is leading us to the conclusion that social stratification has become apparent now more than ever before. Not only in terms of the above-mentioned vaccine accessibility but also with many people getting fines for some mild offenses such as visiting family members in other counties. However, even before this situation, it was widely known that Croatian people showcase a very low level of trust and belief in the country's institutions, no matter if we are talking about the executive, legislative, or judicial branch. Many studies have been conducted in this particular field; thus, we shall try to present some of their findings in the upcoming paragraphs. As it was mentioned in a 2019 paper: "There are different opinions and views on what kind of stratification currently happens in Croatia, what are its main features, and how many layers does it include (...) the society is divided into a group of small elite citizens with money and power, while, on the other hand, there is a vast majority of poor. The middle layer had disappeared and the work of medical, education, and similar professions is underappreciated"<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Regional Stratification**

Of course, when discussing social stratification in Croatia in the last thirty years, one needs to take into account political, economic, historic, and social specificities that differentiate Croatia from other Central and Eastern European countries. Unlike other countries belonging to this group, Croatia had to go through the war-time period which left some parts of the country infrastructurally destroyed and far behind the European standard. Democracy as such did not

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<sup>1</sup> Maslač, Nikolina. 2019. Društvena stratifikacija u Republici Hrvatskoj I usporedba s Europskom unijom. Završni rad. Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile u Puli. Fakultet ekonomije i turizma Dr. Mijo Mirković. <https://repozitorij.unipu.hr/islandora/object/unipu%3A3801/datastream/PDF/view>.

have enough time to consolidate and the ruling party Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) was in power until 2000. In addition, the privatization process in the second half of the nineties was not conducted and regulated transparently, and major consequences of such understanding are felt until this very day. Unfortunately, the lives of many people from all around Croatia are very much alike to the post-war period. The recent earthquakes in Sisak-Moslavina County have shown the true colors of post-war reconstruction with several corruption affairs related to the people who run the reconstruction process have been revealed in the past few weeks. Thus, the economic inequalities are evident the most if we compare the net wages of Croatian counties. For example, there is a high discrepancy between the Zagreb County, on the one hand, (Zagreb, as the country capital, has also a status of a county) and Varaždin and Međimurje counties, on the other, with the latter two being considered as two of the most developed counties with regards to their employment levels and GDP<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, if we look into the value of Gini coefficient which represents income inequalities, we can argue that there was a declining trend of inequalities from 2014 to 2017; however, if we take a broader picture and look into the ratings in the past thirty years, we can say that income inequalities in Croatia have been on the rise<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps the most worrying indicators of social inequalities in Croatia are the following: In 2017, a poverty rate stood at 20.0%; 26.4% of people were living at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and 10.3% were living in a severe material deprivation<sup>4</sup>.

### **The New Findings**

The latest research on social stratification in Croatia was conducted by professor Karin Dolan and her team of experts under the umbrella of the Department of Sociology at the University of Zadar. The project has started in 2016 and lasted until the end of 2020. According to the findings "the very top category of the society is occupied by a small class of those who live much better than others and is comprised of approximately 16% of the respondents; underneath is the middle class with 29% of respondents, then follows the most numerous working class with 44%, while the bottom is occupied with 15% of respondents. Compared to

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<sup>2</sup> Maslač, Nikolina. 2019. Društvena stratifikacija u Republici Hrvatskoj I usporedba s Europskom unijom. Završni rad. Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile u Puli. Fakultet ekonomije i turizma Dr. Mijo Mirković. <https://repozitorij.unipu.hr/islandora/object/unipu%3A3801/datastream/PDF/view>.

<sup>3</sup> Maslač, Nikolina. 2019. Društvena stratifikacija u Republici Hrvatskoj I usporedba s Europskom unijom. Završni rad. Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile u Puli. Fakultet ekonomije i turizma Dr. Mijo Mirković. <https://repozitorij.unipu.hr/islandora/object/unipu%3A3801/datastream/PDF/view>.

<sup>4</sup> Maslač, Nikolina. 2019. Društvena stratifikacija u Republici Hrvatskoj I usporedba s Europskom unijom. Završni rad. Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile u Puli. Fakultet ekonomije i turizma Dr. Mijo Mirković. <https://repozitorij.unipu.hr/islandora/object/unipu%3A3801/datastream/PDF/view>.

other European countries (...) in Croatia there is a slightly smaller share of people at the top, a slightly smaller middle class, and a larger share of those at the bottom”<sup>5</sup>. However, Dolan explains that her research does not perceive the class merely as within the socialistic paradigm of those with larger and smaller incomes; rather, Dolan continues, the class is defined in broader terms whereby those at the top are not understood only as rich, but as members of the society who can afford themselves a more pleasure in life, to travel more, to have access to private services, and are more independent in their professional work<sup>6</sup>. But what are the criteria to define one class as privileged? The study has shown that "top-class largely has salaries above the Croatian average, owns savings and real estate worth more than €108.000. They are often highly educated and live in big cities. Their parents are also well educated which suggests class reproduction processes”<sup>7</sup>. Dolan also explains that the working class is no longer perceived in “classical” terms as before. On the contrary, more and more occupations nowadays are considered as working class and the most common denominator they share is that they have a vocational school degree<sup>8</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, every definition depends on the point of view of the interviewed person. Someone who works in public administration probably does not think of his salary as if he is overpaid for his duties. If you ask the same someone who is working in the private sector, he would argue that those in public administration are having much more than they actually deserve, especially if we take into account the level of stress and responsibilities at work. We can only conclude that social differences in Croatia are getting more pronounced and this conclusion is supported by both of the mentioned studies. The COVID-19 situation makes the people only better aware of that fact.

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<sup>5</sup> Rašović, Renata. 2021. Više od polovice hrvatskih građana teško će se izvući u kriznim situacijama. *Vecernji.hr*. <https://www.vecernji.hr/premium/vise-od-polovice-hrvatskih-gradana-tesko-ce-se-izvuci-u-kriznim-situacijama-1461466>.

<sup>6</sup> Rašović, Renata. 2021. Više od polovice hrvatskih građana teško će se izvući u kriznim situacijama. *Vecernji.hr*. <https://www.vecernji.hr/premium/vise-od-polovice-hrvatskih-gradana-tesko-ce-se-izvuci-u-kriznim-situacijama-1461466>.

<sup>7</sup> Rašović, Renata. 2021. Više od polovice hrvatskih građana teško će se izvući u kriznim situacijama. *Vecernji.hr*. <https://www.vecernji.hr/premium/vise-od-polovice-hrvatskih-gradana-tesko-ce-se-izvuci-u-kriznim-situacijama-1461466>.

<sup>8</sup> Rašović, Renata. 2021. Više od polovice hrvatskih građana teško će se izvući u kriznim situacijama. *Vecernji.hr*. <https://www.vecernji.hr/premium/vise-od-polovice-hrvatskih-gradana-tesko-ce-se-izvuci-u-kriznim-situacijama-1461466>.