

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Croatia

Population: 4.47 millions (#126 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 56,594 square km. Occupying a large portion of the Adriatic coast in the Balkans, Croatia borders Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, and Hungary. The Danube River forms the Serbian border, and the Sava River flows through the capital, Zagreb. As many as 1,200 islands and rock outcroppings string the coast. Plains and small hills cover most of the interior, whereas highlands and more rugged terrain dominate the Adriatic coastline. Coastal areas have a mild Mediterranean climate, whereas the interior is subject to a continental climate characterized by hot summers and cold winters. Earthquakes are a natural hazard. Environmental issues include air pollution and water pollution. Croatia is administratively divided into twenty counties and one city.

Peoples

Croat: 90.4%

Serb: 4.4%

Other: 4.4%

Unspecified: 0.8%

Croats form the majority in most areas. Serbs are concentrated along the Bosnian and Serbian borders. Other ethnic groups include Bosniaks, Hungarians, Slovenes, Czechs, and Roma.

Population: 4,292,095 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: -0.50% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 1.4 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 72.9 male, 79.4 female (2017)

Languages: Croatian (95.6%), Serbian (1.2%), other (3.0%), unspecified (0.2%). Croatian is the official language. Only Croatian has over one million speakers (4.1 million).

Literacy: 99.3% (2015)

History

Croatia has been populated for thousands years. Prior to the birth of Christ, the Illyrians and Greeks colonized the islands. The Roman Empire annexed the region and maintained control until the emergence of the Kingdom of Croatia, which reached its height in the latter half of the eleventh century. Croatia subsequently developed ties with Hungary in the following centuries and was the site of two centuries of war between the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empires. The Austro-Hungarian Empire ruled Croat lands until its dissolution following World War I. Croats, Slovenes, and Serbs united and formed Yugoslavia in 1929. Communism took hold after World War II. Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, but war with Serbia continued until 1995. In 2009, Croatia joined NATO. Croatia became a member of the EU in July 2013.

Culture

Croatia possesses many World Heritage sites and national parks. The Catholic Church continues to strongly influence culture due to a legacy lasting over a thousand years. Croatian-speakers have been concerned about maintaining the purity of their language due to foreign rule for most of the past two centuries. A rich history of dress, art, literature, and music continues. Native cuisine is diverse and a source of national pride. Cigarette and alcohol consumption rates are high.

Economy

GDP per capita: $24,100 (2017) [40.5% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.827

Corruption Index: 49 (2017)

Croatia had one of the most developed economies of the former Yugoslavia, but war in the early and mid-1990s severely damaged infrastructure and deterred investment. EU membership has pressured Croatia to reduce public debt and corruption. Nevertheless, unemployment remains a major economic issue as the unemployment rate was 13.9% in 2017. There have been some issues transitioning to a free-market economy, such as the privatization of government-held companies. Services account for 70% of the workforce and produce 69.5% of the GDP. Industry employs 28% of the labor force and produces 26.5% of the GDP. Primary industries include chemicals, plastics, machinery, metal products, and wood products. Croatia has modest oil reserves. Agriculture accounts for a small portion of the economy and mainly produces wheat, corn, sugar beets, and sunflower seeds. Primary trade partners include Italy, Germany, Slovenia, and Austria.

Accusations of corruption among government officials with military ties are a concern. Smuggling and organized crime are widespread, as illegal drugs, workers, and weapons are trafficked from Eastern Europe and the Middle East to Western Europe. Several individuals who have attempted to expose corruption have been assassinated.[1] In 2017, Croatia ranked among the most corrupt countries in Western and Central Europe along with Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Greece.

Faiths

Christian: 90.7%

Muslim: 1.5%

Other/unspecified: 4.0%

None: 3.8%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic – 3,704,078

Serbian Orthodox – 188,852

Jehovah's Witnesses – 5,206 – 60

Seventh Day Adventists – 2,792 – 89

Latter-day Saints – 624 – 6

Religion

Eight-six percent (86%) of Croatians are Catholic, and 4% are Serbian Orthodox. Many Catholics are religiously active, and approximately 30% attended mass weekly.[2] Serbian Orthodox adherents reside in predominately Serb areas bordering nations to the east. Muslims constitute 1.5% of the population. Other religious minorities are concentrated in urban areas.[3]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is typically upheld by the government. Abuse of religious freedom is not tolerated. There is no official religion, but the Catholic Church does receive special privileges. Many Catholic holidays are national holidays. Some tensions persist between Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims. Registration with the government provides tax and other benefits to religious groups. Nonregistered religious groups may operately freely in the country. Some societal abuses of religious freedom have occurred directed toward Orthodox Christians and Jews.[4]

Largest Cities

Urban: 60%

Zagreb, **Split**, Rijeka, Osijek, Zadar, **Pula**, **Sesvete**, **Slavonski Brod**, Karlovac, Varaždin.

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregation.

Six of the ten largest cities have congregations. Thirty-two percent (32%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

The Church was first recognized by the Yugoslav government as a legal entity in 1975.[5] Kresimir Cosic, a popular Croatian basketball player who joined the Church in the 1970s, helped raise awareness of the Church and its teachings in Yugoslavia.[6] A limited number of North American missionaries served in Yugoslavia in the late 1970s. President Thomas S. Monson dedicated Croatia for missionary work in 1985.[7] The Austria Vienna East Mission was organized in 1987 and administered to Yugoslavia. The Austria Vienna South Mission was created in 1996 and administered the former Yugoslavia. Mission headquarters were relocated to Slovenia in 1999, Croatia in 2003, and back to Slovenia shortly thereafter.[8] Seminary and institute began in 1997 and 2008, respectively. Croatia became part of the Europe Central Area in 2000, which was consolidated with the Europe West Area to form the Europe Area in the late 2000s. In the early 2010s, the Adriatic North Mission headquarters was relocated to Zagreb, Croatia.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 624 (2017)

In 1994, there were one hundred members. Membership reached 200 by 1996. By year-end 2000, there were 319 members.

With the exception of 2003 and 2010, membership has increased every year in the 2000s and 2010s. Growth rates ranged from 2% to 13% per year, with membership typically increasing by 10-30 annually. Church membership totaled 379 in 2002, 424 in 2004, 503 in 2007, and 583 in 2012. In the 2010s, missionaries reported that convert baptisms occur infrequently. In 2017, there was one member per 6,878 people.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 6 (2017)

In 1975, the Church created its first congregation in Zadar.[9] The Zagreb Croatia District was organized in 1980. In 2000, there were four branches in Karlovac, Split, Varaždin, and Zagreb.

In 2003 and 2004, branches were organized in Osijek, Rijeka, and Zadar, bringing the total number of congregations to seven. The Split Branch was discontinued in 2005. A group began meeting in Pula in the late 2000s but was disbanded in the early 2010s.

Activity and Retention

Forty-two Croatian members attended the rededication of the Bern Switzerland Temple in 1992.[10] Forty-seven youth from Croatia and Slovenia met for a youth conference in 2003.[11] A seven-country conference, which included Croatia, had 130 in attendance in 2007.[12] In 2007, 120 attended the groundbreaking of the first church-built meetinghouse in Croatia in Zagreb.[13] Fourteen were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year.

Croatia suffers from major member inactivity and poor convert retention issues. The Zagreb Branch had as many as ninety attending Sunday meetings in the mid-2000s, but in early 2010 averaged around thirty attending weekly. In early 2010, Pula, Rijeka, Varaždin, and Zadar each had approximately five active members and Karlovac had fifteen active members. In the mid-2010s, there were approximately forty-five active members in Zagreb, twenty active members in Karlovac, fifteen active members in Rijeka, six active members in Zadar, and five active members in Osijek. Returned missionaries who served during the mid-2010s indicate that 20-30% of new converts remained active one year after baptism. Total active membership is likely no greater than one hundred, or 16% of church-reported membership for Croatia.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Croatian, Slovenian, Hungarian, Italian, Serbian.

All LDS scriptures are translated into Croatian, Hungarian, and Italian. Only the Book of Mormon is available in Serbian and Slovenian albeit the remainder of LDS scriptures were scheduled to be translated into both of these languages as of late 2017.[14] The Church has translated several unit, temple, priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, young women, primary, missionary, Church proclamations, and family history materials into Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian. Hungarian and Italian have additional Church materials available, such as the Church Handbook of Instructions and many audio/visual materials. Many CES materials are translated in Croatian. The Liahona has twelve Italian issues, twelve Hungarian issues, two Croatian issues, and one Slovenian issue annually.

Meetinghouses

There is only one church-built meetinghouse in Zagreb. Other congregations appear to meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted 161 humanitarian projects since 1985 that have included activities such as clean water initiatives, community projects, emergency response, refugee response, and wheelchair donations. Most recent projects have focused on refugees.[15] Large amounts of humanitarian aid were donated in 1992 due to war in the region.[16] In 1999, the Church donated 130 pigs to needy refugee families to replenish their lost livestock.[17] In 2002, Church members in the Netherlands donated quilts and toys to orphanages in Croatia and Slovakia.[18] In 2003, the Church began planting 1,450 fruit trees at an elementary school in Ratkovac to help increase self-sufficiency.[19]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys full religious freedom in Croatia. Missionaries may openly proselyte. The Church numbers among the 54 recognized religious communities.[20]

Cultural Issues

Many converts face ostracism from family and friends due to the close cultural connections between Croatians and Catholicism. Similar challenges have been experienced in other Eastern or Southeastern European nations, like Poland and Greece. These pressures have influenced member activity rates, as both recent converts and long-term members face societal pressures to disassociate themselves from the LDS Church. Many Croatians smoke and many prospective converts struggle to quit smoking prior to baptism. High alcohol use rates also challenge mission efforts.

National Outreach

The Church has maintained well-reaching proselytizing with full-time missionaries despite low receptivity and few active members. Only four of the 10 largest cities have no congregations and as many as 1.4 million people live in a city with an outreach center (25% of the national population). Outreach in rural areas has yet to be explored, but missionary work with full-time missionaries is most practical in larger cities due to limited resources and low receptivity. Expanding outreach in smaller cities will remain a challenge as twenty cities have 10,000 to 60,000 inhabitants and no mission outreach.

The Church maintains an Internet site for Croatia at http://www.crkvaisusakrista.hr/. In addition to meetinghouse locations, Church teachings, history, and programs are explained in Croatian. The Church also maintains a Croatian version of Mormon.org at https://www.mormon.org/hrv. The website allows for many to learn about the Church individually, to contact missionaries, and to seek out the Church if interested. Use of the Internet site in proselytism can assist in expanding national outreach.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Declines in active membership during the late 2000s and early 2010s appeared largely due to conflict among members and limited fellowshipping. Many stop attending Church because they were offended. Converts have struggled to remain active over the long term. Many missionaries have sought diligently to reduce tensions among members but have seen little long-term success. Recent converts typically have experienced adequate teaching and fellowshipping prior to baptism and do not appear rushed into baptism without developing regular church attendance habits. Some less active members may return to their former churches, challenging future reactivation efforts. The construction of the first church-built meetinghouse in Zagreb and subsequent drop in active members in the city demonstrate that expensive, church-built meetinghouses do not protect or ensure long-term growth in active membership as there continues to be fewer active members in Zagreb in 2018 than there were a decade earlier. Emigration of active members also remains a challenge for fellowshipping and growth.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The homogeneity of the population challenges missionary efforts due to the lack ethnic diversity. Although fewer languages and cultural barriers tend to lessen the resources needed for wide-reaching national outreach, strong associations between ethnicity and religion have reduced receptivity of the Church among many Croatians. Future prospects of outreach among Serbs may result in little friction with Croat members, as Serbs are concentrated in their own communities. Serbs to date have demonstrated little receptivity to LDS mission outreach and are unlikely to experience dedicated ethnic mission outreach in Croatia for years to come due to their small numbers and the lack of mission outreach centers near predominately Serb communities.

Language Issues

The Church has translated a large amount of gospel materials in Croatian despite few active members. Some returned missionaries who served in Croatia help translate materials for the Church, as there are few native members capable of translation work. With the exception of Bosnian and Roma, most languages spoken by minority groups have church materials available.

Missionary Service

Very few Croatian members have served missions, and Croatia remains dependent on foreign missionaries to staff its full-time missionary force. Croatia has few member families and youth, indicating that Croatia will remain dependent on foreign missionaries for many years to come.

Leadership

The Church has struggled to develop local leadership in congregations although there have been some good improvements during the 2010s. Krešimir ?osi?, the charismatic BYU basketball star and translator of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine in Covenants into Croatian, passed away from lymphoma in 1995. The long record of church work in Yugoslavia going back to the mid-1970s has experienced limited success in developing local leadership and a strong Croatian church membership. In May

2010, only two of Croatia's six branches had native branch presidents. The remaining branches had missionaries serve as branch presidents. However, by 2018 all six branches appeared to be led by a native Croatian member with the exception of the Varaždin Branch. Some branches appeared led by a full Croatian branch presidency, whereas others had only one or two native members in the branch presidency. Moreover, the entire district presidency for the Zagreb Croatia District was led by native Croatian members. Nevertheless, the Church may be dependent on mission leadership to function due to the small number of active members.

Temple

Croatia is assigned to the Frankfurt Germany Temple district. Temple trips occur periodically by bus. Current active membership does not appear self-sustaining in staffing needed personnel to conduct many ordinances and activities in the temple in Croatian. It is possible that Croatia could be assigned to the Rome Italy Temple district once the temple is completed in 2019 due to ready access across the Adriatic Sea and close historical relations between Italy and Croatia.

Comparative Growth

Croatia experiences some of the lowest member activity in Europe although activity rates are comparable to Serbia. Predominately Catholic countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America have been much more receptive than Croatia. Croatia ranks among nations with the lowest percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints in Europe but has a greater percentage than some more populous countries like Poland and Serbia. Missions in many Eastern and Southeastern European nations report similar frustrations with low member activity and high convert attrition.

Most Christian groups report little, if any, membership growth. Seventh Day Adventists have declined by 500 over the past decade, and the number of congregations has remained largely unchanged. Evangelicals report little growth. Jehovah's Witnesses appear the most efficient in proselytism and have a large enough member base to provide a sense of community among converts. However, Witnesses have reported slight declines in active members and the number of congregations during the past decade.

Future Prospects

Persistently low member activity, poor convert retention, and slow growth limit long-term prospects for the LDS Church in Croatia. There appear opportunities to expand national outreach, but low receptivity and challenges unifying members in congregations prevents long term, self-sustaining growth and sustainability in outreach expansion. Some cities with a Church presence have historically been heavily reliant on full-time missionaries for leadership and would likely be unable to sustain themselves if full-time missionaries were absent. No additional cities appear likely to open for missionary work until greater self-reliance and receptivity is achieved in cities with outreach centers and receptivity among Croats to LDS outreach improves.

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