

## ON THE ORIGIN OF THE POPULATION OF KRATOVO

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### Abstract

Kratovo, one of the oldest towns in North Macedonia, represents a significant cultural and historical center with continuous habitation from prehistory to the present day. This paper analyzes the origin and ethnic development of Kratovo's population through archaeological, historical, and socio-cultural sources. The town's geographical position and its long-standing connection to mining and trade have enabled continuous demographic and cultural interaction. The influences of Thracian, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman civilizations have left a lasting mark on the ethnic composition and cultural identity of Kratovo. The findings suggest that the modern population of Kratovo is the result of long-term historical processes, migrations, and cultural integration.

**Keywords:** Kratovo, population origin, ethnic structure, archaeology, cultural heritage

JEL Classification Codes: N94

### INTRODUCTION

Kratovo is one of the most historically rich and geographically unique towns in North Macedonia, located in the northeastern part of the country, on the slopes of the Osogovo Mountains. Its setting within a former volcanic crater and proximity to important medieval trade routes made it a crucial economic and cultural hub throughout different epochs.

Archaeological research confirms that the Kratovo area was inhabited as early as the Neolithic period, with continuous settlement during the ancient, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman eras (Mitrev 2015). During the Middle Ages, Kratovo developed as a major mining and trading center, known for its skilled craftsmen and silver production (Stojanovski 2009).

The aim of this study is to explore the origins and development of Kratovo's population across historical periods, emphasizing the geographical, ethnic, and cultural factors that have shaped its modern demographic structure.

The research employs a multidisciplinary approach combining:

- Historical analysis of archival and written sources, including Ottoman tax registers and medieval trade records.
- Archaeological interpretation of material remains from ancient settlements, fortifications, and medieval mining sites in the Kratovo region.
- Ethnographic analysis of local customs, dialects, and cultural traditions, which preserve traces of diverse ethnic influences.

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Data were systematized chronologically and geographically to demonstrate the continuity and transformation of the population structure.

### **Geographical Position**

Kratovo is a town that captivates with its atmosphere and unique architecture. Within a very small area, a significant cultural and historical heritage is concentrated (Doma 2025).

Kratovo is a town located in the northeastern part of the Republic of North Macedonia. It lies on the western slopes of the Osogovo Mountains, on both sides of the Kratovska River, at the bottom of an extinct volcanic crater—after which the town was named—at an elevation of approximately 700 meters above sea level. The urban area covers around 220 hectares.

The geographical position of Kratovo is of strategic importance, as the town lies at the crossroads of major routes connecting the northeastern part of Macedonia with other regions of the country. Historically, this position was particularly significant for the development of trade, cultural exchange, and the migration of various peoples and civilizations. Kratovo today maintains good transportation connections, allowing easy access to other regions of Macedonia. The main road routes connecting Kratovo with nearby cities and areas include:

- Kratovo – Kumanovo Road: This route leads to the city of Kumanovo, an important regional and economic center. It is part of a major road network linking the northeastern and central parts of Macedonia.
- Kratovo – Skopje Road: Although Skopje is about 60 kilometers away, there is a direct road connection providing easy access to the capital city and its main transport networks.
- Local roads: Kratovo is also connected to smaller villages and settlements in the region through local roads that facilitate the transport of goods and services, as well as connections with rural areas.

The transport infrastructure of Kratovo is not limited to its road network. Although the town does not have a railway station, regional transportation links are maintained through regular bus lines connecting Kratovo with major cities and settlements across Macedonia. This enables efficient passenger and goods transportation to and from Kratovo.

The geographical and transport connectivity of Kratovo plays a vital role in the region's economic development, particularly in the context of tourism, trade, and social integration with other parts of the country.

The town has a moderate continental climate, with an average annual air temperature of 11.6°C and an average annual precipitation of about 700 mm.

Kratovo represents an example of a town that has historically transformed as a result of demographic, political, and social changes, especially during the period after the Balkan Wars (*Ristevski, 2018, p. 45*).

### **Population**

The results of the most recent census indicate that the population of Kratovo decreased from 10,441 in 2002 to 7,545 in 2021, with a population density of 20 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>.

The population of Kratovo is ethnically diverse. As in many other regions of North Macedonia, it includes a mixture of different ethnic communities. The majority group is Macedonians, while smaller communities include Albanians, Roma, and other ethnic groups. This diversity reflects the long history of migrations and cultural influences in the region.

Kratovo has a history of both emigration and migration, particularly of young people seeking employment in larger urban centers or abroad, which has affected the town's demographic situation. Demographic challenges include youth migration and low birth rates, resulting in a declining population. In recent decades, many young people have moved to bigger cities or abroad, reducing the working-age population. However, the town has the potential to retain its residents through infrastructure development, improving living conditions, and stimulating local economic growth, especially through tourism and rural development.

At the end of the 19th century, Kratovo had 4,500 inhabitants, a significant number of whom were Turks. After 1912, many Turks emigrated, transforming Kratovo into a small town, which by 1931 had only 1,883 residents. Today, Kratovo is a small town of 6,924 residents, 97% of whom are Macedonians. Among the minorities, only the Roma are present (151 residents).

The historical population data we present mainly refer to 1931 and earlier, as more detailed records from later periods are unavailable. Many families from that time no longer exist due to the passage of time and emigration. Post-war resettlement data are incomplete.

In 1931, Kratovo had 172 families (350 households), including 146 Christian families (310 households), 17 Muslim (Turkish) families (29 households), and 9 Roma families (11 households). On average, each family corresponded to 2.03 households. In 1890, Kratovo had 1,230 households: 760 Turkish, 410 Christian, and 60 Roma. By 1912, there were 1,080 households.

Until 1912, the majority of the population was Turkish. In 1931, there were 49 "old settler" families (135 households) and 123 migrant families (215 households). Notable long-established families included Ashchi-Krstovci, Repovci-Koko-Romanci, Karavanci, Bozhikovski, Dzhamgozci, and others.

These families included respected members such as priests, merchants, and goldsmiths.

Regarding the Turkish population, according to local tradition, some families settled immediately after the Ottoman conquest. For example, members of the Suleyman-bey family recalled their ancestors relocating from Konya in Asia Minor. Other long-established families that settled before the 18th century included Zaimci, Semurlaovci, Zmichevci, Demir-Alijski, Anabeshpara, Edipovci, Yantevci, and Asan-Efendijski. All these families reported origins from Asia Minor. The rural villages around Kratovo, due to revolutionary committee activities and military conflicts, lost a significant part of their population, which relocated to the town seeking security (*Simić, 1914, p. 102*).

Due to the emigration of Turks and the vacant properties that remained, Kratovo underwent a significant demographic and economic transformation. (*Dorđević, 1931, p. 57*).

Other Christian and Muslim populations settled in the 17th–20th centuries. In the 17th century, families such as Petrevci-Pop-Andonovci, Mangovci, Grozdanzi-Topuci, and Pop-Dimitrijevcı arrived from Prilep, Samokov (Bulgaria), and other areas. Many of these settlers were priests or prominent merchants fleeing Ottoman persecution, seeking freedom and security in Kratovo, which offered more autonomy due to its mines.

During the 18th century, Christian settlers fled from Albanian incursions and Turkish anarchy in eastern regions, relocating to the mountainous Kratovo-Zletovo area. Settler families included Gligorovci, Nakovci-Gjorevci, Golubanci, Kovachi, Chacheri, Despotovci, Toshevci, Miladintsi, and others. Some Turkish families also settled in Kratovo in the 18th century, including Groshchiji, Nasfovci, and Atula-Efendijski, due to administrative and economic reasons.

In the first half of the 19th century, population inflows increased due to the reopening of the mines and the need for labor. Settlers came from nearby regions such as Skopje, Kumanovo, Ovche Pole, Kriva Palanka, Kočani, Lesnovo, Probištip, and others. Many were artisans, workers, or servants employed by local authorities.

In the second half of the 19th century, settlement continued, particularly from nearby villages. Families arrived from Shlegovo, Filipovci, Karvachko, Talashmance, Petrshino, Blizanci, Turaļevo, Nezhilovo, and other locations. Some Muslim families also settled, including migrants from Bosnia and Bulgaria.

In the 20th century, new settlers continued arriving from nearby villages, while only a few came from more distant regions such as Prokuplje (Serbia) and Montenegro. This continuous migration shaped Kratovo's

demographic, social, and cultural landscape over several centuries, combining long-established families with newer arrivals from different regions.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Population</b>
1900	4,500
1921	2,041
1931	1,883
1948	1,925
1953	1,993
1961	2,411
1971	3,735
1981	5,420
1994	6,481
2002	6,924
2021	5,401

Table 1. Population trends in Kratovo by census years 1900-2025

After 1912, during the period of the Balkan Wars and the First World War, Macedonia experienced significant political, ethnic, and social changes. Kratovo, like many other regions in Macedonia, underwent notable demographic transformations. One of the main reasons for the influx of new inhabitants during this period was the insecurity and lack of safety in rural areas caused by the activities of revolutionary committees and ongoing military conflicts.

During the first decade of the 20th century, Macedonia faced considerable political turbulence. During the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), the Kratovo region, along with other parts of Macedonia, was affected by military operations and violence between different ethnic groups, armed forces, and revolutionary organizations. Revolutionary groups, operating under the influence of various national and political forces (known for their struggle for national rights), were active in many areas of Macedonia, including Kratovo.

Due to this instability, many people from surrounding villages began relocating to Kratovo, seeking greater safety in the town. As a result, the town experienced an increase in population, especially from nearby villages where revolutionary activity was more intense.

After the Balkan Wars and the First World War, Macedonia came under the rule of the Kingdom of Serbia, leading to significant political changes. As a consequence, many Turks in the region were forced to leave their homes, with some emigrating to Turkey as part of the population exchanges following the Balkan Wars. This process left a substantial number of vacant properties available for new inhabitants. Due to the insecurity in the surrounding villages and the availability of properties formerly owned by departing Turks, many Macedonians from neighboring villages moved to Kratovo, purchasing land and houses from the emigrants. These migration processes occurred especially after 1912, when a new political and social structure was established, transforming Kratovo into a town that could offer greater stability compared to the rural villages. Large emigration occurred during the Balkan Wars and World War I. Therefore, after the First Balkan War, together with the retreat of the Turkish army, many people from the surrounding villages relocated to Kratovo, seeking greater safety in the town (*Apostolovska Toshevska, 2018, p. 12*).

The arrival of new residents in Kratovo also changed the town's demographic structure. The newcomers from surrounding villages not only increased the population but also contributed to the development of the local economy, particularly through agriculture and small crafts. Many of the new inhabitants engaged in mining, farming, and trade, which helped revitalize the town's economy after the wartime disruptions. Additionally, this migration influenced the cultural structure of Kratovo, as the new residents brought with them diverse customs and traditions, contributing to a rich and dynamic social context in the town.

Overall, this period was a time of significant change and adaptation for Kratovo. The town, with its unique geographical and architectural features, continues to leave an impression on visitors today, with its historic and often irregular streets, bridges, and houses. Like many other areas in Macedonia, Kratovo underwent demographic, political, and social transformations that have shaped its contemporary identity.

Demographic changes in Macedonian towns like Kratovo directly influence the local economy, culture, and urban structure (Stojmilov, 2016, p. 214). The architectural and urban heritage of Kratovo testifies to the various social and economic processes that have taken place throughout its history (*Tomovski et al., 1980, p. 33*).

## **Movement of the population in Kratovo**

### **1. Historical Context**

- Pre-20th century: Kratovo, a town in northeastern North Macedonia, was historically a mining and trade center. Population fluctuations were often influenced by economic activity in mining and regional political stability.
- Early 20th century: The Balkan Wars (1912–1913) and the subsequent collapse of Ottoman rule led to migration waves. Many Turks left the area, selling property to incoming settlers from surrounding villages.
- Mid-20th century: Industrialization and urbanization led to modest population growth, with many rural inhabitants moving into Kratovo seeking jobs and better living conditions.
- Late 20th century: Economic decline and limited local opportunities caused emigration, especially among younger generations, to larger Macedonian cities and abroad.

## 2. Reasons for Population Movement

- Security and Safety: Early 20th-century population movement was influenced by insecurity in surrounding villages due to armed conflicts and uprisings.
- Economic Opportunities: Mining, trade, and later public services and small industries attracted people to the town.
- Land Availability: Many incoming settlers purchased abandoned properties from emigrating Turkish families after 1912.
- Urbanization: Migration from rural areas to the town for education, healthcare, and jobs increased during the Yugoslav era.
- Emigration Abroad: Recent decades saw out-migration due to limited economic prospects locally.

Period	Estimated Population	Key Factors Influencing Movement
1900	~4,500	Ottoman decline, local trade, mining
1920	~5,000	Influx from surrounding villages, post-war resettlement

Period	Estimated Population	Key Factors Influencing Movement
1950	~6,200	Post-WWII industrialization, urbanization
1980	~7,000	Continued urban migration, economic stability
2000	~6,500	Economic decline, emigration abroad
2021	~6,000	Aging population, youth migration

Table 3. Demographic Trends (Illustrative Table) *Macedonian State Statistical Office (DZS)*

### 3. Population Movement Characteristics

- Internal Migration: Mainly from nearby rural settlements into Kratovo.
- External Migration: Emigration to Skopje, abroad (Western Europe, USA) in search of better livelihoods.
- Demographic Impact: Aging population, lower birth rates, decline in overall population in the 21st century.

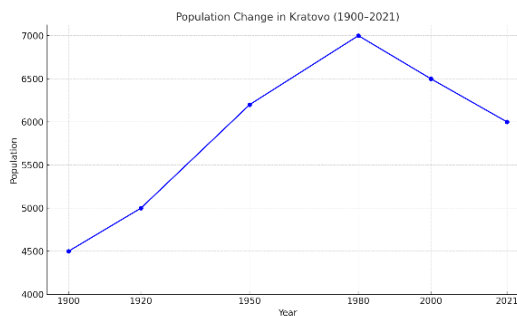


Chart 1. Movement of the population in Kratovo

### Overview of Recommendations for Increasing the Population in Kratovo

The town of Kratovo faces a continuous decline in population due to economic challenges, migration to larger cities, and an aging local population. This trend is not unique to Kratovo but is part of a broader demographic phenomenon observed in many small towns and rural areas in North Macedonia.

To stimulate population growth, several strategies are recommended:

1. Economic stimulation and local economic development – Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, developing tourism and crafts, and attracting investors can create new job opportunities and help retain young residents in the town.
2. Support for young families – Financial and housing incentives for young families wishing to settle in Kratovo, along with support for education and healthcare, can encourage natural population growth.
3. Infrastructure development – Modernization of road, utility, and digital infrastructure can make Kratovo a more attractive place to live and conduct business.
4. Promotion of cultural and historical heritage – With its unique architecture, historic bridges, and cultural events, Kratovo can attract new residents and tourists, creating economic and social dynamics that stimulate population growth.
5. Attracting diaspora and rural migration – Encouraging the return of emigrants and their investment in the local economy can contribute to stabilizing and increasing the population.

Overall, a combined strategy linking economic development, social support, and promotion of cultural and historical resources can contribute to a positive demographic trend and sustainable population in Kratovo.

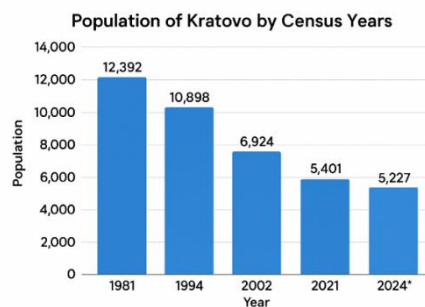


Chart 2. Population of Kratovo by Census Years

## Conclusion

The historical and demographic development of Kratovo reflects the complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors that have shaped the town over the centuries. From the period of the Balkan Wars and the First World War to the modern era, Kratovo experienced significant population movements influenced by security concerns, migration, and changes in governance.

The emigration of Turkish inhabitants and the influx of Macedonian settlers from surrounding villages contributed to the transformation of the town's demographic, economic, and cultural structure.

Moreover, Kratovo's population trends in the 20th and 21st centuries demonstrate the broader challenges faced by small towns in North Macedonia, including population decline due to migration, aging, and limited economic opportunities. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies aimed at economic development, support for young families, infrastructure modernization, and promotion of the town's unique cultural and historical heritage.

In conclusion, understanding the origin and evolution of Kratovo's population provides valuable insights into the town's social and historical identity. It highlights the importance of integrated policies and community initiatives to sustain demographic growth, preserve cultural heritage, and promote a vibrant and resilient local society.

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