

TRENDS IN THE TOP TEN POPULAR DOG BREEDS IN SERBIA (2008–2022)

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Abstract

Information on the prevalence of the most popular breeds within one society can provide insights into its sociological, economic, and anthropological aspects, while also aiding in the organization of more effective veterinary services and improving animal welfare. This research aimed to determine whether there has been a change in dog breed ownership between the Serbian capital city, Belgrade (BG), and non-Belgrade (non-BG) regions over the last 15 years, for three five-year periods: 2008–2012, 2013–2017, and 2018–2022. Data on breed prevalence were collected from the official Vetup database of the Republic of Serbia. Mixed-breed dogs were the most prevalent in both BG and non-BG regions across all three periods, though their percentage has declined in the most recent period relative to purebred dogs. In the first period, large working/guardian breeds dominated in all regions. German Shepherds consistently ranked as the most prevalent purebred dogs across all periods and regions. In contrast, Maltese dogs emerged as the most prevalent breed in Belgrade during the two most recent

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periods. In 2013–2017, other small breeds began to emerge, and in the third period, they dominated the BG region, while larger breeds remained more common in non-BG regions. These changes may reflect lifestyle changes and urban preferences for smaller breeds better suited to apartment living. These trends reflect dog ownership preferences, shaped by lifestyle changes and socio-economic factors in urban and rural areas, while also aligning with global patterns but probably retaining unique traits of local patterns.

Key words: Belgrade, mixed-breed dogs, non-Belgrade regions, purebred dogs, ranking

INTRODUCTION

In the last several decades the population of companion animals in developed countries has increased compared to all precedent periods (Paul et al., 2022; Herzog, 2006). The developing countries have been following the same trend but no detailed analysis of the prevalence of companion animals or dog breeds has been published. However, the popularity and preferences of pet species are important for understanding the specifics of the veterinary market and enhancing its organization. Also, analyses of trends in pet preferences offer valuable sociological, anthropological, and economic insights into a society (Fallahi et al., 2024; Herzog, 2006). For example, in the Republic of Serbia (RS), dogs are more popular pets than cats (TGMResearch), although official statistics or scientific research data are lacking.

In recent decades, socio-economic policies in RS have undergone rapid changes, leading to a decline in the number of small agricultural households and a decrease in the rural population (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia – SORS). Small farm animal production also declined, and young citizens have moved into urban areas (SORS). Belgrade, the capital, has become the most popular destination for relocation. While the overall population of Serbia is gradually declining, the population in Belgrade continues to rise. In 2008, Belgrade had 1.62 million residents; by 2022, this number had increased to 1.68 million. In contrast, in the same interval, the total population of Serbia decreased from 7.35 to 6.65 million (SORS). Additionally, RS has followed the global trend of an increasing number of pet animals, reflecting a change in household structures and lifestyle preferences across the country (Vetup).

In 2005, Serbia established a central database, Vetup, containing key information about owned dogs, linked to the mandatory anti-rabies vaccination program. This system makes Serbia an ideal setting for obtaining reliable data related to the pet dog population.

The aim of this research is to determine whether there has been a shift in dog ownership between Belgrade and the rest of the country over the last 15 years, across three distinct five-year periods. Additionally, it identifies the most prevalent dog breeds in Serbia and examines their distribution over time between Belgrade municipalities (BG) and the regions outside Belgrade (non-BG regions).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Microchipping and dog registration in the Republic of Serbia began and became mandatory in 2005 (Legal Information System of the Republic of Serbia – PISRS), and electronic data have been managed in the Central database Vetup. The database contains the following information: date and place of dog microchipping, microchip number, passport number, breed, sex, and fur color. Additionally, the database is updated with the date of each dog's death. Breeds included in the database total 373, all recognized by the *Federation Cynologique Internationale* (FCI). Data on the total number of registered dogs in the RS, BG, and non-BG regions, were collected from this database for three five-year periods: 2008–2012, 2013–2017, and 2018–2022, using search terms “breed” and “Belgrade municipalities”. The data for non-BG municipalities were retrieved when Belgrade municipalities were excluded from the search. Data on the number of residents were downloaded from the official SORS website.

Only one author (D.Z.) had direct access to Vetup database. In conducting this research, the authors fully adhered to the RS Law on Personal Data Protection, ensuring that all collected data was processed and analyzed in compliance with legal and ethical standards.

Data analysis

The analysis of the collected data on the number of dogs and number of residents was conducted using descriptive statistics (Excel, Microsoft Office 2019).

To visualize the change in the number of dogs in BG and non-BG areas across the three periods, the number of dogs in both BG and non-BG was expressed as a percentage of the total dog population (1805576 dogs in 15 years) in each period separately. Additionally, for each period, the number of dogs per resident (DPR) in both BG and non-BG was calculated. To track and analyze changes in DPR in BG and non-BG, normalization was performed by calculating the ratio of DPR in BG to DPR in non-BG.

The population of the ten most common dog breeds (including mixed-breeds) for each period was shown as the percentage representation of each breed within the dog population in the respective period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Relative spatio-temporal abundance of dogs in Serbia

In the three examined periods, it was evident that the percentage of dogs in BG increased, while in non-BG regions, it decreased (Figure 1). Indeed, during the first period (2008–2012), the number of dogs in non-BG regions was six times greater

than in BG, whereas in the most recent period, this difference was reduced to four times (Figure 1). Similarly, a relative increase in dog ownership in BG *vs.* non-BG was noticed (Figure 2). These adjustments highlighted the growing concentration of dog ownership in urban areas, aligning with broader urbanization trends and changes in pet ownership dynamics over time.

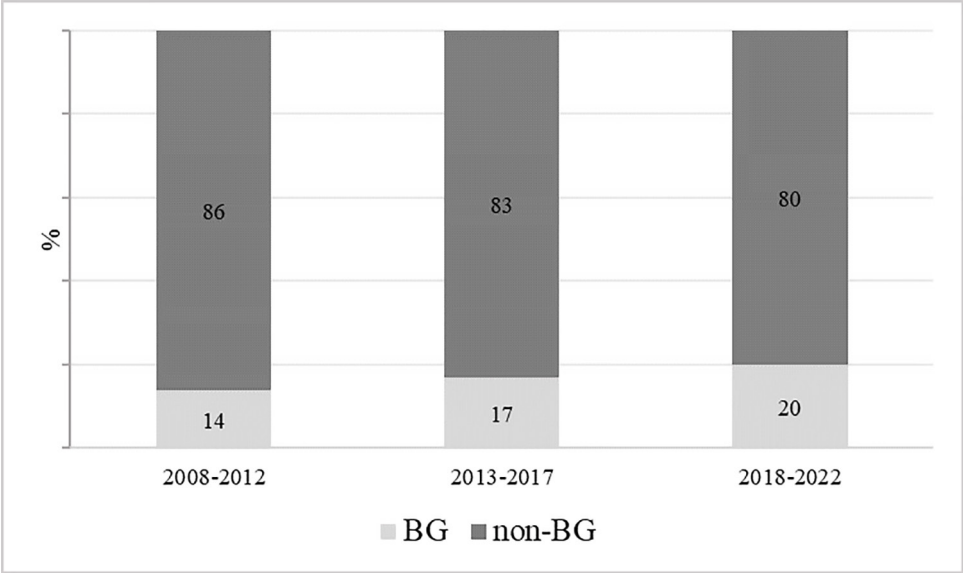


Figure 1. Percentage of dogs populating BG and non-BG regions.

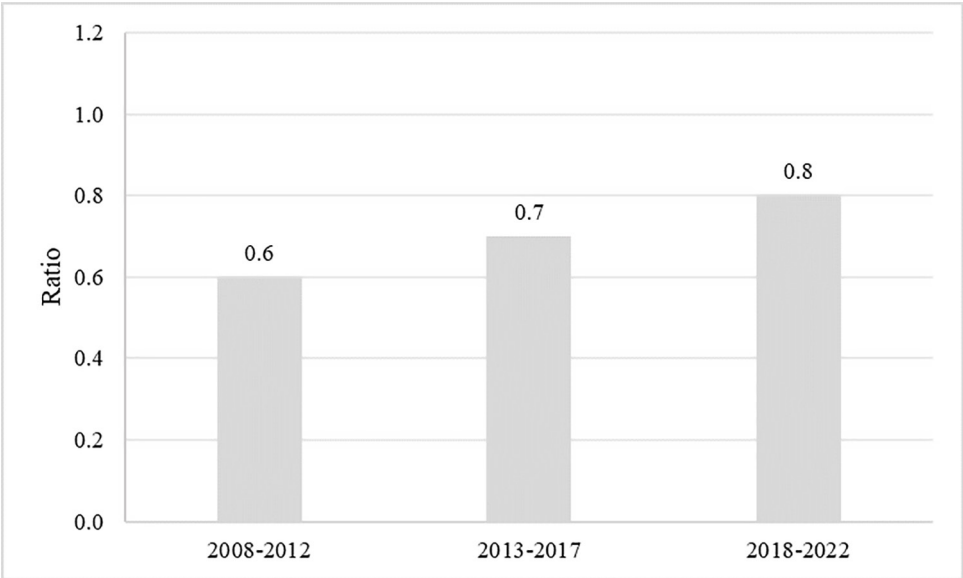


Figure 2. The ratio of dogs per resident in BG when normalized to non-BG regions.

Spatio-temporal popularity of top ten breeds in Serbia, Belgrade and non-Belgrade regions

Notably, in all three periods, the number of mixed-breed dogs was approximately ten times greater than that of the next most prevalent purebred (Figure 3). Therefore, separate figures were created to illustrate the prevalence of mixed-breed and purebred dogs. The dominance of mixed-breed dogs has at least two explanations: cultural preferences and economic factors. Namely, in Serbia, non-governmental organizations and individuals are very active in the campaign for dog adoption. Mixed-breed dogs often provide a more affordable option for pet ownership, making them a popular choice for many households. This approach not only helps to reduce the financial burden associated with acquiring a pet, but also supports animal welfare by offering homes to dogs that may otherwise be overlooked in favor of more expensive purebred dogs. However, there is a visible trend of a decrease in the mixed-breed dog population in favor of purebred dogs. In 2008–2012, mixed-breed dogs accounted for 55% of the total dog population in Serbia, whereas in the last period (2018–2022), their prevalence decreased to 40% (Figure 3). Interestingly, the percentage of mixed-breed dogs in the RS aligns with the United States of America (USA) data that estimate their prevalence at 51% (Kogan et al., 2022). A United Kingdom (UK) study found that mixed-breed dogs were also the most popular, but with a 24% prevalence (O'Neill et al., 2023). This could suggest similar factors influencing dog ownership patterns, such as adoption trends, and attitudes towards breeding. For example, a recent study conducted in Germany that included equal number of mixed and purebreds reported the owners' concerns over mixed-breed dogs, as they described them as less calm, less sociable toward other dogs, and having more problematic behavior than purebreds (Turcsán et al., 2017). It might also be worth exploring how socio-economic factors, cultural preferences, and the availability of breed-specific *vs.* mixed-breed dogs contribute to these numbers in different countries.

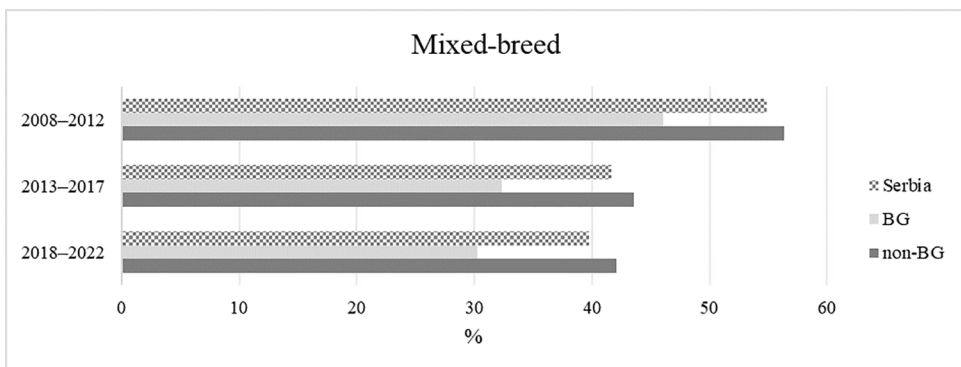


Figure 3. The prevalence of mixed-breed dogs in Serbia, Belgrade (BG) and non-Belgrade (non-BG) regions across the three periods.

The nine most common purebred breeds differed between the BG and non-BG regions, with a total of 20 breeds alternating in popularity over the examined periods. To present the order of these most popular breeds in the BG and non-BG regions, they were ranked in descending order based first on their prevalence in the RS as a whole, and then specifically in the non-BG and BG regions.

In the period 2008–2012 in the RS, and equally in BG and non-BG regions, the first most popular purebred dog was the German Shepherd with a prevalence of around 4% to 5% (Figure 4). German Shepherds are classified as working dogs (AKC). Their popularity may stem from Yugoslavia's history (RS succeeded Yugoslavia's heritage) as a state with a strong, well-organized military service that widely utilized this breed. Over time, the widespread use of this breed in the military appears to have influenced private ownership, with German Shepherds transitioning from service dogs to a favored breed in households.

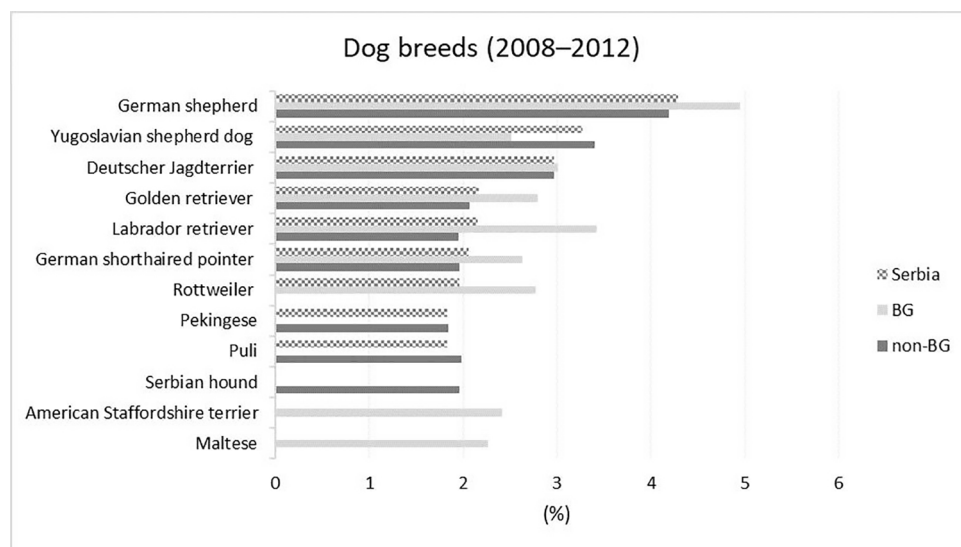


Figure 4. The nine most popular purebred dogs in Serbia, Belgrade (BG) and non-Belgrade (non-BG) regions during the 2008–2012 period. The order of the nine most popular pure breeds is as follows: Serbia, non-Belgrade (non-BG), and Belgrade (BG) regions. Notably, after the sixth position, the breeds popular in non-BG regions differ from those in BG. Moreover, the total number of breeds in Serbia is predominantly influenced by the numbers in non-BG regions, as the absolute number of dogs is several times higher than those in BG.

The ranking in popularity of other purebred dogs varied across the periods examined. In the 2008–2012 period, the second most popular breed was the Yugoslavian shepherd dog (Figure 4), a strong working breed, often used as a guardian for open spaces. Other popular breeds during this time included the Deutscher Jagdterrier, Golden and Labrador retrievers, and the German Shorthaired Pointer – all known for their hunting and working capabilities (Figure 4). These breeds were more abundant in non-BG regions, although they were also present in BG municipalities. This

distribution likely reflects a large suburban population of hunting dogs, such as terriers and pointers. It also suggests a growing trend of keeping retrievers in households as family pets, particularly for their reputation as good companions for children. In addition, retrievers are versatile working breeds, known for their adaptability to indoor and outdoor living, which likely contributes to their popularity (Kogan et al., 2019). Interestingly, Rottweilers and American Staffordshire terriers (ASTs) ranked seventh and eighth in popularity in BG, both known for their courage, loyalty and use as guardian dogs. However, according to a survey on USA, veterinarians' perception of breed characteristics related to bite risk rating, German Shepherds and Rottweilers were ranked high on a scale, while ASTs in the middle (Kogan et al., 2019). When a similar survey was conducted among the USA adult population, all three breeds popular in Serbia, i.e., German Shepherds, Rottweilers, and ASTs, were ranked among the top five breeds perceived as having a serious bite risk (Kogan et al., 2022). In RS, statistics on dog bites are rather limited, indicating only that the risk of bites is higher from owned dogs than from stray dogs (Vučinić and Vučičević, 2019). However, education about the causes of dog aggressiveness and their appropriate handling, and more objective official and public reporting on dog bites should minimize these accidents. Pekingese dogs occupied the eighth position (Figure 4). This shows an ambiguous situation with a mix of both working/guardian breeds and smaller companion dogs in the city's pet population.

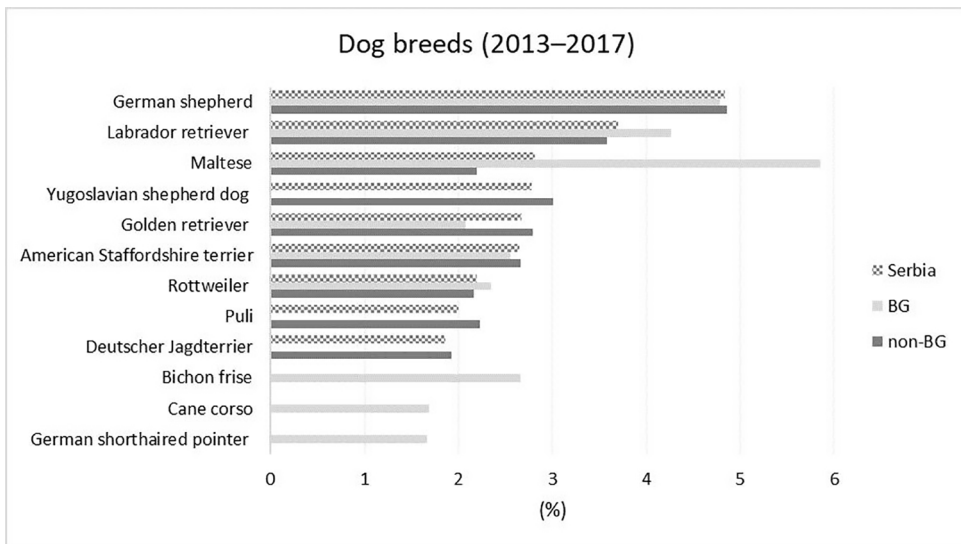


Figure 5. The nine most popular purebred dogs in Serbia, Belgrade (BG) and non-Belgrade (non-BG) regions during the 2013–2017 period. The order of the nine most popular pure breeds is as follows: Serbia, non-Belgrade (non-BG), and Belgrade (BG) regions. Notably, after the sixth position, the breeds popular in non-BG regions differ from those in BG. Moreover, the total number of specific breeds in Serbia is predominantly influenced by the numbers in non-BG regions, as the absolute number of dogs is several times higher than those in BG.

For the period 2013–2017, the ten most common breeds in the RS were also the ten most common breeds in non-BG regions, although their ranking differed. In that period, the German Shepard maintained a stable population in BG and non-BG regions (Figure 5). Labrador retrievers rose to second and Maltese to third place when the prevalence in Serbia was analyzed. However, during 2013–2017, it was notable that Maltese dogs, known for their small size and friendly nature, outnumbered all other purebred dogs in the BG region (Figure 5). This shift may signify the beginning of a trend toward smaller companion breeds, reflecting the preference for dogs better suited to apartment living, and new fashion in pet ownership. A large survey in Germany found that the majority of dog owners are women (Turscán et al., 2017), highlighting the potential for further exploration of anthropological factors in dog ownership. The Yugoslavian Shepherd dog maintained its popularity in non-BG regions, although its prevalence in BG declined during 2013–2017. Golden Retrievers held their position in the rankings, while ASTs saw a notable increase in popularity compared to the previous period. Interestingly, two very different breeds, the small Bichon Frise and the large, powerful Cane Corso, also began gaining popularity in BG. These contrasting trends in dog breed choices suggest there are deeper socio-demographic factors at play, warranting further exploration. The continued popularity of the German Shorthaired Pointer, likely in suburban areas, reinforces the appeal of hunting breeds in regions where more space and outdoor activity are available. In addition, it is evident that in this period, small dog breeds started to expand as city pet populations.

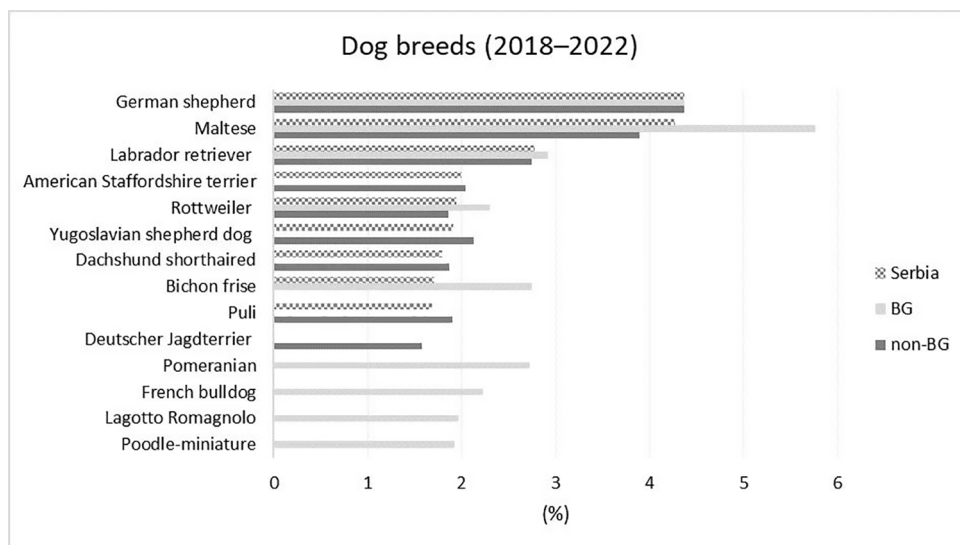


Figure 6. The nine most popular purebred dogs in Serbia, Belgrade (BG) and non-Belgrade (non-BG) regions during the 2018–2022 period. The order of the nine most popular pure breeds is as follows: Serbia, non-Belgrade (non-BG), and Belgrade (BG) regions. Notably, after the sixth position, the breeds popular in non-BG regions differ from those in BG. Moreover, the total number of specific breeds in Serbia is predominantly influenced by the numbers in non-BG regions, as the absolute number of dogs is several times higher than those in BG.

In the most recent analyzed period (2018–2022), German Shepherds and Maltese dogs dominated both the BG and non-BG regions (Figure 6). In particular, the supremacy of Maltese dogs in the BG region was striking. Compared to the previous period, Maltese dogs overtook Labrador Retrievers (third place), marking a shift in urban pet preferences. Throughout all study periods, ASTs steadily rose in popularity, gaining fourth place (2%), although, within 2018–2022, their relatively high prevalence shifted towards the non-BG region. Interestingly, in the UK in 2019, ASTs were in the fifth place (4%) on the scale of popularity (O'Neill et al., 2023). In Serbia during 2018–2022, Rottweilers (fifth position) and Yugoslavian shepherd dogs (sixth position) also maintained high rankings. Meanwhile, five new fashionable small breeds, Dachshund (shorthaired), Bichon Frise, Pomeranian, French Bulldog, and Miniature Poodle, primarily populated the BG region and/or Serbia. Despite their inherent welfare and health problems (Ekenstedt et al., 2020), there has been a global rise in their popularity in Western countries like USA and UK (O'Neill et al., 2023; AKC). The owner's decision-making may be influenced by several factors: 1) small breeds are suitable for apartments and convenience for travel; 2) the creation of a “personal identity project” boosting a social “status” (Packer et al., 2020), and 3) fad (Herzog, 2006). In addition, a recent Danish study found that owners tend to be more emotionally attached to pets with health issues (Sandøe et al., 2017). This phenomenon, known as “savior syndrome” creates a paradox. Namely, instead of avoiding breeds with inherent health issues, owners are breed-loyal and increasingly seeking emotional investment by purchasing these specific breeds, despite the known challenges. This counterintuitive behavior highlights the emotional bond that owners develop with pets requiring additional care, even when these breeds are predisposed to significant health problems. Interestingly, aside from mixed-breed dogs, three of the top ten popular breeds in both Serbia and the UK overlap: Labrador Retrievers, ASTs, and French Bulldogs (O'Neill et al., 2023). This similarity raises questions about the underlying factors driving breed preferences across countries. Exploring whether shared characteristics, such as temperament, adaptability, or perceived status, impact these trends on an international level would be insightful. Additionally, it would be beneficial to compare data from different regions globally to uncover any broader patterns or cultural influences affecting breed popularity. From a veterinary care perspective, the observed rise in small breed dogs highlights the need for veterinary professionals to address their multiple health and welfare concerns, emphasizing owner education and public awareness campaigns in RS.

Limitations of the study are related to possible non-accurate management of Vetup database by veterinarians who should in a timely manner register changes in ownership including the death of a dog. To be able to perform deeper analyses on dog welfare, health status, and socio-economic and cultural differences between the owners, a questionnaire-based study should be performed in the future.

CONCLUSION

Data from the Vetup database (2008–2022) revealed changes in dog breed popularity over time, reflecting a general decline in large breeds and a rise in small breeds. This trend aligns with a decrease in the number of citizens living in rural regions, increasing urbanization, and global preferences for fashionable breeds. Although the mixed-breed dogs are the most popular pets, a steady decline in their ownership over the study period was noted. These data could be further exploited to reinforce the politics of dog adoption and to raise owners' awareness about endangered welfare and health issues in small breeds of dogs.

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Authors' contributions


FJ – descriptive statistics and exploration of literature, DZ – data management, MR, DD, KS and JFA exploration of literature, MKF wrote and edited the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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TRENDovi U POPULARNOSTI DESET NAJČEŠĆIH RASA PASA U SRBIJI (2008–2022)

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Kratak sadržaj

Informacije o zastupljenosti najpopularnijih rasa pasa u jednom društvu mogu pružiti uvid u sociološke, ekonomske i antropološke aspekte tog društva, doprinoseći na taj način unapređenju veterinarskih usluga i dobrobiti životinja. Cilj ovog istraživanja je bio da se utvrdi da li se među vlasnicima pasa menjao trend u odabiru rase, na nivou glavnog grada, Beograda, i područja van Beograda, tokom 15 godina u tri petogodišnja perioda: 2008–2012, 2013–2017, 2018–2022. Podaci o zastupljenosti rasa prikupljeni su iz zvanične baze podataka Republike Srbije – Vetup. Psi mešanci su bili najzastupljeniji u Beogradu i u područjima van Beograda, premda je, tokom poslednjeg posmatranog perioda, njihov broj opao u korist rasnih pasa. Tokom prvog analiziranog perioda, krupne rase u tipu radnih pasa i pasa čuvara, bile su najbrojnije u Beogradu i van njega. Psi rase nemački ovčar predstavljaju najzastupljeniju rasu u svim periodima u celoj Srbiji. Maltezeri su postali najzastupljeniji psi u Beogradu tokom poslednja dva perioda. Tokom drugog perioda, male rase pasa su počele da postaju sve brojnije, da bi tokom trećeg perioda pet malih rasa pasa našlo među 10 najpopularnijih rasa u Beogradu. Krupne rase pasa sačuvali su svoje mesto među popularnim rasama u vanbeogradskim područjima. Ove promene mogu biti odraz savremenog načina života, gde se manje rase pasa lakše „uklapaju“ u život u stanu. Ovi trendovi odražavaju preference vlasnika pasa, oblikovane promenama u načinu života i socio-ekonomskim faktorima u urbanim i ruralnim sredinama. Takođe, uočeni trendovi su vrlo slični sa obrascima u svetu, uz pojedine specifičnosti vezane za domaće rase pasa.

Cljučne reči: Beograd, mešanci, rangiranje, rasni psi, vanbeogradska područja