



Freedom in the World 2015 - Croatia

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2015 Scores

Status: Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 1.5

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 2

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 1

OVERVIEW

Despite bans imposed in December 2013 on same-sex marriage and the use of Serbian Cyrillic on official signs, a law approving same-sex partnerships was passed in June 2014, and the Constitutional Court ruled against restrictions on the use of Cyrillic in August.

Croatia held a presidential election at the end of December 2014. Incumbent president Ivo Josipović was poised to combat Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović in a runoff in January 2015.

In March 2014, a Croatian court sentenced former prime minister Ivo Sanader to nine years in prison for embezzling millions of dollars from state coffers; his party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), was also found guilty in the case.

Croatia is still plagued by a stagnant economy, including a rise in unemployment to around 20 percent.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 36 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

The president, who serves as head of state, is elected by popular vote for a maximum of two five-year terms. Members of the 151-member unicameral parliament (Sabor) are elected to four-year terms. The prime minister is appointed by the president and requires parliamentary approval.

In 2011 parliamentary elections, the center-left opposition Kukuriku coalition, comprising the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and three other parties, placed first with 80 seats. The Croatian

Democratic Union (HDZ) and its coalition partners, the Croatian Civic Party and the Democratic Centre, followed with 47 seats. The SDP's Zoran Milanović became prime minister.

A presidential election was held on December 28, 2014. Incumbent president Ivo Josipović of the SDP and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović of the Croatian Democratic Union HDZ led the race against two other candidates. As neither won a majority, a runoff was scheduled in January.

Croatia joined the European Union in 2013.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 15 / 16

Following Croatia's first multiparty elections in 1990, the center-right HDZ ruled until 1999. Power has since alternated between the HDZ and the center-left SDP, including at the presidential level. Several smaller parties have also won representation in parliament.

In the parliament, eight seats are set aside for ethnic minorities, including three for ethnic Serbs. Another three seats are reserved for representatives of Croatians living abroad. Roma are generally underrepresented in government.

C. Functioning of Government: 9 / 12

A new Criminal Code, in effect since 2013, enforces stiffer penalties for various forms of corruption. In recent years, international bodies including the European Commission have noted that sentences in corruption cases are relatively weak, and more effort is needed to clean up corruption within public procurement processes. In March 2014, in what was seen as a pivotal case for anticorruption progress, a court sentenced former prime minister Sanader to nine years in prison for siphoning millions of dollars from the state. The HDZ itself along with the party's former treasurer, accountant, and spokesperson were also found guilty of related charges. Along with prison time, Sanader was ordered to pay back €2.8 million (\$3 million), and the HDZ was required to pay back €3.79 million (\$4.1 million). This was the second conviction in two years for Sanader; he was convicted in 2012 of taking bribes from a Hungarian energy company.

Civil Liberties: 50 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 14 / 16

The constitution guarantees freedoms of expression and the press, and these rights are generally respected in practice. However, journalists face political pressure, intimidation, and occasional attack. In February 2014, an unknown assailant threw a bucket of feces at reporter Ante Tomić while he was sitting at a coffee shop in the town of Split; the perpetrator reportedly yelled, "Now you can write about me again." In the town of Omiš, during Carnival, a group of people burned an effigy of investigative journalist Vinko Vuković, who had reported on corruption in the town.

The legacy of the 1991-95 war in Croatia remains a sensitive issue. In 2013, veterans protested a government plan to introduce bilingual public signs – in Croatian (in the Latin alphabet) and in Serbian (in Cyrillic script) – to serve the Serb minority, which comprises 4.4 percent of the population nationwide but more than 30 percent in some municipalities. The government continued implementing the project in 2014, and in August the Constitutional Court ruled against a proposed referendum on restricting the use of Cyrillic.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion. A group needs at least 500 members and five years of registered operation to be recognized as a religious organization. Members of the Serbian Orthodox Church continue to report cases of intimidation and vandalism, though such incidents are less common than in the past.

Academic freedom is guaranteed by law, though subjects such as sexual health remain taboo in the socially conservative country. In 2013, the Croatian Catholic Church launched a public relations campaign against a government health education program in primary and secondary schools that included information on sexual health and same-sex relationships. The Constitutional Court suspended the program, arguing that the government failed to consult with parents on the curriculum.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12

The constitution provides for freedoms of association and assembly. A variety of nongovernmental organizations operate in Croatia without interference or harassment. The constitution allows workers to form and join trade unions, though unlawful dismissals of union members have been reported. In February 2014, unions organized a protest and two-hour strike against a proposed labor reform on the grounds that it will give too much flexibility to employers for hiring and firing. Public transportation in the capital stopped for five minutes as a sign of solidarity, and local trains in the country did not run.

F. Rule of Law: 11 / 16

Judicial independence is generally respected. Under a new judicial appointments system that came into effect in 2013 to increase professionalism, all judicial candidates must complete the State School for Judicial Officials. Despite some progress on improving efficiency as well as a high number of judges per capita, the case backlog in courts remains above the EU average.

Prison conditions do not meet international standards due to overcrowding and poor medical care.

The proceedings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes committed during the 1991-95 conflict were ongoing in 2014. In March, Croatia testified that the devastation of the city of Vukovar by Serbian troops in 1991 should be classified as genocide.

Respect for minority rights in Croatia has improved over the past decade. Croatia has both an antidiscrimination act and hate-crime legislation. In January 2014, Croatia adopted the Free Legal Aid Act, which aims to improve access to the legal system for vulnerable populations, as well as to reduce discrimination. However, Roma face widespread discrimination, including poor access to primary and secondary education. In June 2014, Zagreb held its largest-ever gay pride parade.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 13 / 16

The constitution prohibits gender discrimination, but women have a higher unemployment rate and earn less than men for comparable work. Women hold 24 percent of the seats in parliament, well below the 40 percent target under law. Domestic violence against women is believed to be widespread and underreported. Women are arrested in 43 percent of domestic violence cases, even though men represent 95 percent of perpetrators.

After a December 2013 referendum that banned gay marriages, in July 2014 the Croatian parliament passed a law allowing same-sex civil unions. The law affords same-sex couples equal rights in inheritance, social benefits, and taxation. Same-sex couples remain barred from adopting children.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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