

Freedom in the World 2022 - Croatia

Free

85

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 36 / 40

[Civil Liberties](#) 49 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

85 / 100 Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Croatia is a parliamentary republic that regularly holds free elections. Civil and political rights are generally respected, though corruption in the public sector is a serious issue. The Roma and ethnic Serbs face discrimination, as do LGBT+ people. In recent years, concerns about the presence of far-right groups and figures espousing discriminatory values in public life have increased.

Key Developments in 2021

- Local elections were held in May, and saw the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) win most mayoral and municipal races throughout the country. However, in Zagreb, Tomislav Tomašević of the left-wing We Can party won the mayoral race with more than 65 percent of the vote; We Can candidates also won 23 of the 47 seats on Zagreb's city council.
- Police violence against migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers continued throughout the year, with nearly 12,000 illegal pushbacks documented along the country's border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, leading to criticism from human rights advocates and European Union (EU) representatives.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? **4 / 4**

The president, who is head of state, is elected by popular vote for a maximum of two five-year terms. The prime minister is head of government and is appointed by the president with parliamentary approval.

Former Social Democratic Party (SDP) prime minister Zoran Milanović defeated incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović in the second round of the country's presidential elections in January 2020, capturing 52.7 percent of the vote. Voter turnout was 55 percent.

Chairman of the HDZ Andrej Plenković remained prime minister following the 2020 legislative elections.

Local elections were held in May 2021. The governing HDZ won mayoral races in 15 of Croatia's 20 prefectures, but did not win in the country's three largest cities. In Zagreb, Tomislav Tomašević of the left-wing We Can party won 65.25 percent of the vote, defeating far-right candidate Miroslav Škoro in the second round of the elections.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

Members of the 151-member unicameral parliament, called the Hrvatski Sabor, are elected to four-year terms.

Prime Minister Plenković called for the 2020 parliamentary election to occur in July, a few months ahead of schedule. Critics claimed he moved the date forward to capitalize on the public's perception of the governing HDZ's success in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. The HDZ went on to capture 66 seats, which enabled the party to form a coalition government with two smaller parties. The main opposition party, the SDP, won 41 seats, the far-right Homeland Movement party secured 16, and the new left-wing We Can party took 8. Though the elections were deemed free and fair, ethnic Serb candidates experienced harassment during the campaign.

The HDZ won most races throughout the country in the May 2021 local elections. However, both the HDZ and SDP lost a number of council seats in Croatia's largest cities; in Zagreb, We Can won 23 of the 47 seats on the city council.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

While some concerns about the use of public funds for political campaigns persist, in general, the State Election Commission (SEC) implements robust electoral laws effectively.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Citizens may freely organize and participate in the activities of a wide variety of political parties. A slate of new right- and left-wing populist parties and candidates emerged in the 2019 European Parliament elections. Two new coalitions made breakthroughs in the July 2020 parliamentary election: the far-right Homeland Movement and the new left-wing coalition We Can. In May 2021, We Can won both the Zagreb mayoral and city council elections with a decisive mandate.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

The SDP-led opposition coalition holds a significant bloc of seats in the legislature and is generally able to operate free from restrictions or intimidation. In general, however, the HDZ has dominated politics and draws support from the Roman Catholic Church, veterans, and a growing number of conservative nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The main SDP-led opposition bloc has won the most seats in only two parliamentary elections since 1991, although the country was headed by non-HDZ executives from 2000-2015, including an SDP president from 2010 to 2015 and again since 2020.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 3 / 4

While voters and candidates are generally able to freely express their political choices, many public servants obtained their positions through patronage networks, and thus risk becoming beholden to a party or special interest group as a result. Patronage networks are particularly influential in Zagreb, which was under the stewardship of HDZ-affiliated mayor Milan Bandić—considered one of the country's most powerful politicians—almost continuously from 2000 until he passed away suddenly in February 2021. Bandić's nearly 20-year tenure was marked by corruption allegations and credible allegations of improper hiring practices and public procurement deals.

The Catholic Church remains influential in Croatia and has begun associating with conservative and far-right civil society groups, which have become a bigger factor in local politics in recent years. Veterans groups are also influential, especially in regard to the still contentious memory politics of the Independence War (1991-1995) and the position of ethnic Serbs in Croatian society.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

Eight parliamentary seats are set aside for ethnic minorities, including three for ethnic Serbs. However, the political interests of marginalized groups, notably Roma and Serbs, are underrepresented. Another three seats are reserved for Croatian citizens in the diaspora, including ethnic Croats in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Women are represented across political parties, and women have held Croatia's presidency between 2015 and 2019 and the prime minister's office between 2009 and 2011. However, the number of women in parliament decreased in 2016 after the Constitutional Court struck down a law requiring 40 percent of a party's candidates be women. In the 2020 parliamentary election, 35 women from various political parties won seats in parliament.

The treatment of ethnic Serbs in public office in Croatia has deteriorated in recent years. In September 2018, sitting lawmaker and Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDS) leader Milorad Pupovac was pelted with food items by a protester in Zagreb. Pupovac claimed the incident reflected growing hostility toward the Serb population from ascendant right-wing movements in the country, many of which enjoy the tacit support of the HDZ. Pupovac remained the target of verbal attacks throughout 2019 and 2020, and his party's election posters were repeatedly defaced during both the European Parliament and Croatian elections.

Societal discrimination discourages LGBT+ people from participating in politics, and elements of the political establishment have espoused discriminatory attitudes in their activism.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives 4 / determine the policies of the government? 4

Democratically elected representatives are duly installed into office and are generally able to make public policy without undue external influence or pressure.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 3 / 4

A criminal code in effect since 2013 enforces stiffer penalties for various forms of corruption. While some progress has been made, official corruption—including nepotism, bribery, fraud, and patronage—remains a serious problem. The European Commission singled out corruption as a major issue facing the country and local NGOs have observed that the problem has actually worsened since the country joined the bloc in 2013.

In November 2020, former prime minister Ivo Sanader was sentenced to eight years in prison for taking money from public companies to create slush funds for the HDZ. The HDZ was fined and compelled to return millions of illegally obtained funds.

In July 2021, Kazimir Bačić, the director of the state broadcaster Croatian Radiotelevision (HRT), was arrested on suspicion of bribery and influence trading; he was released from custody in October. Bačić was a leading figure in the broader HDZ patronage network and a long-time associate of Milan Bandić.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 3 / 4

In 2013, Croatia adopted the Law on the Right of Access to Information. The legislation created a proportionality and public-interest test designed to balance reasons for disclosing information and reasons for restricting it. It also established an independent information commissioner to monitor compliance. However, government bodies do not always release requested information in a timely manner.

Media reports in 2018 suggested that former economy minister Martina Dalić and a group of well-connected businesspeople and lawyers crafted a 2017 law allowing the government to take over management of the troubled agricultural company Agrokor. The entire drafting process took place in private meetings outside of official proceedings. Facing conflict-of-interest allegations, Dalić resigned in May 2018.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4

Media in Croatia is highly polarized but generally free from overt political interference or manipulation. However, journalists continue to face threats, harassment, and occasional attacks—sometimes at the hands of police—which has created an atmosphere of self-censorship. The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and local journalist associations have warned of growing political pressure and attacks on the Croatian press under the HDZ government. A 2020 European Commission report warned about deteriorating media freedoms in Croatia.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 3 / and private? 4

The Croatian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and this is generally upheld in practice. However, the small Serb Orthodox community remains vulnerable to harassment, and members have reported vandalism of their churches. Jewish communities and other groups have expressed increasing concern about Holocaust denial and displays by right-wing nationalists of symbols and slogans associated with the fascist Ustaša regime that governed Croatia during the Second World War. Revisionist accounts of the Ustaša period continued to be promoted by far-right groups and newspapers in 2021.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political 3 / indoctrination? 4

While there are generally no overt restrictions on speech in classrooms, critics continue to allege inappropriate political interference at all levels of education. While aspects of a long-planned modernization of school curriculums were approved by the parliament in 2018, the HDZ has long sought to delay the updates and has moved to install its own members into the group tasked with developing its policies—including extremely conservative members opposed to sex education.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 4 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

People are generally free to engage in discussions of a sensitive nature without fearing surveillance or retribution, although there have been some reports of police arresting individuals voicing criticism of the government.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is protected and respected in Croatia.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged 4 / in human rights- and governance-related work? 4

NGOs in Croatia are robust, active, and free from restrictions. However, many groups have complained of growing political pressure from parts of the government and the HDZ against journalists and civil society activists.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 4 / 4

The constitution allows workers to form and join trade unions, and this right is generally respected in practice.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

While judicial independence is generally respected, there have been recent concerns about the influence of extreme right-wing groups on the judiciary. For example, in 2017, a court reversed a 1945 conviction of an academic who was complicit in atrocities committed by the fascist Ustaša regime. Critics allege the courts have been ruling in line with the views of right-wing NGOs and the HDZ, while the courts maintain that they are redressing partisan rulings of the Yugoslav communist era.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 3 / 4

Due process rights are generally upheld, but the system tends to work more efficiently for individuals with abundant resources or high social standing.

In November 2018, Ivica Todorić, the former owner of Agrokor under investigation for fraud in relation to the company's collapse, was extradited from the United Kingdom. He was arrested upon arrival in Croatia but released days later after posting the €1 million bail. Todorić was acquitted in one trial in October 2020 but still faced other charges.

The International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) has criticized Croatia for its slow progress in identifying human remains of victims of the 1991–95 conflicts and in making reparations to survivors and their families.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war 3 / and insurgencies? 4

Violence by state and nonstate actors is uncommon. Prison conditions do not meet international standards due to overcrowding and inadequate medical care.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the 2 / population? 4

Ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT+ people in Croatia face discrimination. Analysts have expressed concerns that the increasing visibility of far-right, nationalist groups has spread discriminatory rhetoric. Occasionally, the government's actions suggest their endorsement of far-right groups, and observers have expressed concern that the government has tacitly approved of discriminatory behavior. A group of NGOs in December 2018 criticized the government for lacking a comprehensive human rights policy, and warned of the continuing deterioration of protection of human rights in the country, especially for marginalized groups and women.

The constitution prohibits gender discrimination, but women earn less than men for comparable work and hold fewer leadership positions.

According to a June 2021 Council of Europe (CoE) report on the protection of national minorities, ethnic Serbs continue to face high levels of discrimination. In July, a cadet was dismissed from the state police academy, allegedly for filming herself performing a traditional Serbian folk dance while in uniform; the Police Officers' Union has suggested that the Serbian origin of the dance led to her dismissal.

Police violence against migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers continued in 2021, according to the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Most such incidents, including nearly 12,000 illegal pushbacks of refugees and migrants, took place along the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The DRC has produced photographs and testimony of grave abuses allegedly committed by border police toward migrants and refugees, including sexual violence and torture. In December, the CoE's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) found that Croatian authorities had repeatedly failed to investigate reports of these "systematic" and "serious" abuses allegedly committed by border police.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of 4 / residence, employment, or education? 4

Freedom of movement is protected by the constitution and upheld in practice. People may freely change their place of residence, employment, or education.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private 3 / businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4

Property rights are generally well protected. However, corruption can inhibit normal business operations.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and 3 / size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4

In 2014, following a 2013 referendum that banned same-sex marriage, the parliament passed a law allowing same-sex civil unions. The law affords same-sex couples equal rights in inheritance, social benefits, and taxation, and in April 2021, an administrative court in Zagreb ruled that same-sex couples have the right to adopt children.

Domestic violence remains a concern. Convictions for rape and domestic violence can bring lengthy prison terms, although Amnesty International noted that the vast majority of cases receive light sentences of one year or less. Police sometimes fail to adhere to recommended procedures for handling reports of domestic violence.

In April 2018, lawmakers ratified the Istanbul Convention, a treaty on preventing and combating gender-based and domestic violence. The treaty was unpopular among conservative and far-right groups who believed its tenets could lead to the legal introduction of same-sex marriage, a third gender category, or school curriculum changes. In response, the government adopted a statement saying the treaty's adoption would not change the legal definition of marriage. Amnesty International criticized the Croatian government for failing to harmonize its legislative and policy framework with the treaty's terms.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

Worker protection laws are robust, and the Office of the Labor Inspectorate actively investigates work sites. However, labor violations remain a problem within the hospitality sector. Workers in the informal sector have less access to legal protections.

Human trafficking remains a problem, sentences for those convicted of it can be light, and witness statements are not always given the appropriate consideration in court cases.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2021



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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583
F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
Imprint & Disclaimer
F.A.Q.
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