

CROATIA

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CROATIA 2016/2017

Croatia experienced a period of political instability triggered by a no-confidence vote in the newly appointed government. Reception conditions for asylum-seekers were generally adequate; but there was no coherent long-term social integration policy. Discrimination against ethnic minorities persisted. Freedom of the media was undermined. Heightened nationalist rhetoric and hate speech contributed to growing ethnic intolerance and insecurity.

Background

A new government was formed in January, two months after general elections which failed to produce an outright winner. The volatile coalition collapsed in June, triggering a vote of no confidence in the government led by Tihomir Orešković, and the dissolution of the Parliament in July. Following elections in September, the centre-right HDZ party, that won 61 out of 151 seats, entered into a coalition with small centre-right parties and formed a new cabinet led by Andrej Plenković.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Croatia remained a transit country for refugees and migrants heading to Western Europe. Recognizing that only a limited number of people claimed asylum and remained in Croatia for an extended period of time, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights stated that conditions in reception centres were adequate. They noted that there were services available to refugees and migrants, including psychosocial support and language education, but that these were mainly provided by NGOs. Human rights organizations noted shortcomings in asylum and immigration legislation, and criticized a Draft

Aliens Law adopted by the government in May and still under consideration by the Parliament as of December. The Bill included provisions criminalizing social and humanitarian assistance to irregular migrants and retained measures requiring migrants subject to deportation to pay the cost of their accommodation and removal from the country.

Croatia had received 50 refugees by December, including 30 Syrians from Turkey, as a part of the EU resettlement scheme, and 10 asylum-seekers each from Greece and Italy under the relocation scheme. Croatia has committed to accept a total of 1,600 refugees and asylum-seekers under the EU resettlement and relocation schemes until the end of 2017. While reception conditions upon arrival in the country remained adequate, the authorities were yet to implement a comprehensive policy to ensure effective long-term social integration of refugees and migrants.

Crimes under international law

The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia raised concerns about the pace and effectiveness of prosecutions by the national courts of crimes committed during the 1992-1995 war. The law regulating the status of civilian victims of war passed in 2015 helped ease access to reparations and made it easier for survivors to access crucial services, but challenges remained in providing all victims, especially ethnic minorities, with equal and effective access to justice.

For the second consecutive year, no progress was made in establishing the fate and whereabouts of 1,600 persons disappeared during the war.

Discrimination

Discrimination against ethnic minorities and Roma remained widespread. The legislative framework for the prevention of discrimination provided adequate protection in law, but was severely under-utilized.

Hate speech

The period of political instability around the turn of the year was accompanied by a surge in nationalist rhetoric and hate speech targeting specific groups, in particular ethnic Serbs, refugees and migrants. Civil society groups recorded increased instances of the media and public officials “evoking fascist ideology” from the past by promoting the use of inflammatory iconography and generally fuelling an anti-minority sentiment.

Although instances of incitement to discrimination and even violence against minorities were rarely investigated, courts regularly prosecuted cases of defamation and insult to the honour and reputation of persons. These offences were classified as serious criminal offences under the Criminal Code. Journalists remained vulnerable to prosecution in these cases.

Ethnic minority rights

UNHCR recorded that about 133,000, over half, of the ethnic Serbs who fled the country during the war had returned by the end of 2016, but it expressed concern about persisting obstacles for Serbs to regain their property.

The number of ethnic minorities employed in public services was below the national targets. Serbs faced significant barriers to employment in both the public and private labour market. The right to use minority languages and script continued to be politicized and unimplemented in some towns.

Roma

Despite the authorities' efforts to improve the integration of Roma, Roma continued to face significant barriers to effective access to education, health, housing and employment.

UNHCR registered 2,800 Roma without permanent or temporary residence who were at risk of statelessness. Roma experienced difficulties obtaining identity documents which limited their access to public services.

Freedom of expression – media and journalists

Persistent threats to freedom of the media and attacks against journalists continued. In March, the government abruptly ended the contracts of nearly 70 editors and journalists at the public broadcaster Croatian Radio Television, in what was perceived as an attempt to influence its editorial policy. Simultaneously, the authorities decided to abolish state subsidies for smaller non-profit media and independent cultural initiatives, further threatening media pluralism.

Croatia was downgraded from place 54 to 63 in the World Press Freedom Index.

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