



Freedom in the World 2016 - Croatia

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Freedom Status: Free

Aggregate Score: 87

Freedom Rating: 1.5

Political Rights: 1

Civil Liberties: 2

Quick Facts

Capital: Zagreb

Population: 4,215,000

GDP/capita: \$13,507.40

Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

Net Freedom Status: N/A

OVERVIEW

Croatia held a presidential runoff and parliamentary elections in January and November 2015, respectively. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović won the runoff by an extremely slim margin to become the first female president of post-independence Croatia. Following the parliamentary vote, the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which won the most seats, agreed to form a ruling coalition with the centrist Bridge of Independent Lists (Most).

The Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court overturned major corruption-related convictions against former prime minister Ivo Sanader on procedural grounds during the year, ordering retrials in each case. Sanader was released in November to await the new trials.

Along with its neighbors in the Balkans and other European countries, Croatia faced an unprecedented wave of migration, particularly of asylum seekers from the Middle East. Aside from temporarily closing its border with Serbia in September, Croatia generally complied with international standards and regulations for the treatment of refugees.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 37 / 40 (+1)

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 Croatian Parliament (Hrvatski Sabor) are elected to four-year terms. The prime minister is appointed by the president and requires parliamentary approval.

Croatia held the runoff to its December 2014 presidential election in January 2015. Outgoing president Ivo Josipović of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) lost to Grabar-Kitarović of the HDZ by a margin of less than one percent.

Parliamentary elections were held in November – the first since Croatia joined the European Union (EU) in 2013. No party won an outright majority. The opposition HDZ, led by Tomislav Karamarko, won 33.5 percent of the vote, securing 59 seats. Prime Minister Zoran Milanović's SPD came in second place with 56 seats, and parliamentary newcomer Most won 19 seats. The remaining seats went to smaller political parties and representatives of ethnic minorities. Most and the HDZ reached an agreement to form a coalition government in late December, following extended negotiations.

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 parliamentary representation. In 2015, the surprisingly strong electoral performance of Most, which began as a regional platform in 2012, brought a degree of diversity to the party system and was perceived as a sign of popular dissatisfaction with the country's two major parties.

Eight parliamentary seats in a separate national constituency are set aside for ethnic minorities, including three for ethnic Serbs. Another constituency with three seats is reserved for representatives of Croats living abroad. The interests of the Roma minority are generally underrepresented.

C. Functioning of Government: 10 / 12 (+1)

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 progress in the prosecution of corruption cases, but maintained that stronger efforts are needed to eliminate malfeasance in public procurement processes. Corruption convictions against former prime minister Sanader were in the public eye in 2015. In 2012, a lower court found Sanader guilty of accepting bribes from a Hungarian energy firm and an Austrian bank, sentencing him to 10 years in prison. In a separate case in 2014, a court sentenced Sanader to nine years in prison for siphoning millions of dollars from the state, ordering him to repay \$3 million. In July 2015, the Constitutional Court reversed the 2012 convictions, and in October, the Supreme Court annulled the 2014 ruling, with both courts citing procedural errors and ordering retrials. The retrial of the bribery case began in September. Efforts to combat corruption have also led to investigations into the mayors of several cities for corruption-related offenses. Among other recent cases, Zagreb mayor Milan Bandić and two associates were charged in February with misusing public funds.

Public officials are required to submit financial disclosure reports and generally comply; freedom of information is legally guaranteed.

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 May, investigative journalist Željko Peratović was attacked and beaten outside of his home. Although the assailants mentioned his reporting on illegal gravel excavation during the attack, Peratović claimed that the attack could be connected to his coverage of a murder in which the secret police of the former Yugoslavia were implicated. Police apprehended three suspects in May and were investigating the case at year's end.

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 Latin and Cyrillic to serve the Serb minority, which comprises more than 30 percent of the population in some municipalities. The government continued implementing the project in 2014, and in August of that year, the Constitutional Court ruled against a proposed referendum on restricting the use of Cyrillic. However, tensions increased in August 2015 when the local administration of Vukovar, a town in eastern Croatia with a large Serb minority, passed a decision to erase Cyrillic from public signs. Also in August, commemoration ceremonies for the 20th anniversary of Operation Storm, the Croatian military's 1995 offensive against territory held by Serb separatists, escalated tensions between Croatia and Serbia. Each country issued official statements condemning the other's events, and gatherings in both Croatia and Serbia included xenophobic remarks and incidents.

The Croatian 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, and a variety of nongovernmental organizations operate in Croatia without interference or harassment. In May 2015, veterans' protests that began in October 2014 turned violent as participants clashed with police outside the building of the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs, where they had maintained an encampment since the beginning of the protest. The protesters demanded that the minister resign, and called for dialogue with the prime minister about veterans' benefits.

The constitution allows workers to form and join trade unions, though unlawful dismissals of union members have been reported. Teachers' unions organized a strike stretching from late September to early October to demand a salary increase.

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 training in a special state school. Despite some progress on improving efficiency as well as a high number of judges per capita, the system's case backlog remains above the EU average. Prison conditions do not meet international standards due to overcrowding and inadequate 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 2015 and are expected to conclude in 2017. In 2014, Croatia testified that the devastation of the city of Vukovar by Serbian troops in 1991 should be classified as genocide. Separately, in January 2015, the Constitutional Court of Croatia overruled a Supreme Court judgment that had found Croatian politician Branimir Glavaš guilty of war crimes against Serbs and sentenced him to eight years in prison. The Constitutional Court ordered new proceedings as well as an inquiry into whether Glavaš's human rights had been violated in the judicial process.

In July, Croatian officials announced plans to withdraw from an arbitration panel devoted to a protracted border dispute with Slovenia. The announcement followed a leaked conversation published by the Croatian newspaper *Večerni list* suggesting that a Slovenian representative on the panel had breached impartiality rules by sharing information with a member of Slovenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Croatia experienced an unprecedented wave of migration in 2015, with more than 550,000 people – primarily asylum seekers – arriving in the country during the year, mostly with the intent of continuing to other EU countries. Croatian authorities generally complied with international standards for the rights and treatment of asylum seekers, although the flow of migration strained government resources and raised tensions with neighboring states.

Respect for minority rights has improved over the past decade. Croatia has both an antidiscrimination act and legislation against hate crime. In 2014, Croatia adopted the Free Legal Aid Act, which aims to improve access to the legal system for vulnerable populations and to reduce discrimination. Nevertheless, Roma face widespread discrimination, including poor access to primary and secondary education.

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 15 percent of parliamentary seats, well below the 40 percent target under law. Domestic violence against women is believed to be widespread and underreported. In domestic violence cases, victims as well as perpetrators are often detained for questioning.

In 2014, following a 2013 referendum that banned same-sex marriages, the 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 cannot adopt children.

According to the U.S. State Department's 2015 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Croatia does not comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but has made increasing efforts to do so in recent years, including through awareness and prevention campaigns. Women and children in Croatia are particularly at risk for sex trafficking.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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