



Freedom in the World 2018 - Croatia

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Freedom Status: Free

Aggregate Score: 86 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 1.5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 1 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 2 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 4,200,000

Capital: Zagreb

GDP/capita: \$11,638

Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

OVERVIEW

Croatia is a parliamentary republic that regularly holds free elections. Civil and political rights are generally respected, though there are serious problems with corruption in the public sector.

Minority rights have improved over the last two decades, though the Roma and Serb minorities face discrimination, as do LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people.

Key Developments in 2017:

- In April, the governing Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) lost its coalition partner, the reformist Bridge of Independent Lists (Most), over conflict-of-interest allegations involving the finance minister. The HDZ formed a coalition with the liberal Croatian People's Party (HNS) in June.
- A controversial plaque containing a fascist-era slogan that had been placed near the World War II-era Jasenovac concentration camp was removed in September. However, President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović around the same time appeared to endorse the slogan, calling it "an old Croatian greeting."
- In June, students and teachers led mass demonstrations against the government's reluctance to implement popular reforms aimed at updating the country's education system.

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 37 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 12 / 12

A1. 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.

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 conservative HDZ by a margin of less than one percent. Stakeholders broadly accepted the poll's result.

HDZ chairman Andrej Plenković became prime minister following the 2016 legislative elections, in which HDZ won a plurality of seats.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

Members of the 151-member unicameral Croatian Parliament (Hrvatski Sabor) are elected to four-year terms.

Snap parliamentary elections in September 2016 – which were held after the previous prime minister lost a no-confidence vote, and were the second legislative polls in less than a year – were marked by low turnout, though an Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) monitoring mission found the generally well administered and the results credible. The HDZ and its allies won 61 seats, and the party has led the government since then, with support from smaller parties. The composition of the government changed in 2017, after the reformist Bridge of Independent Lists (Most) withdrew from the HDZ-led coalition after refusing to back Finance Minister Zdravko Marić, who was implicated in a conflict-of-interest controversy related to his time working at Agrokor, Croatia's largest private company, which is now under state administration. The HDZ in June allied with the liberal Croatian People's Party (HNS), which was part of the SDP-led opposition coalition.

The HDZ posted strong results in municipal elections held in 2017.

A3. 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 maintains a fair standard for elections in Croatia.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 15 / 16

B1. 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. Small far-left and far-right parties made gains in the May 2017 local elections.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

The main opposition bloc, headed by the SDP, has won the most seats in only two parliamentary elections since 1991, although the country was headed by an SDP president from 2010 to 2015. The SDP-led opposition coalition holds a significant bloc of seats in the legislature, and is generally able to operate without facing restrictions or election-related intimidation. But in general, the HDZ has dominated politics, and draws support from members of the Catholic Church, veterans, and a growing number of conservative NGOs.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 4 / 4

While voters and candidates are generally able to freely express their political choices, the Roman Catholic Church is politically influential, and has advocated for a ban on same-sex marriage and restrictions on abortion. Many public servants obtained their positions through patronage networks, and may be beholden to a party or special interest as a result.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, 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 minority groups, notably Roma and Serbs, are underrepresented.

Women are represented across political parties, and a woman currently holds Croatia's presidency. However, the number of women in parliament decreased in 2016 after the Constitutional Court struck down a law requiring that 40 percent of a party's candidates be women. The 2016 OSCE election monitoring mission called for political parties to run more women candidates, and to promote more women into senior party leadership positions.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 10 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 4 / 4

Democratically elected representatives are duly installed into office, and are generally able to make public policy.

C2. 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, and while some progress has been made, official corruption – including nepotism, bribery, fraud, and patronage – remains a serious problem. Numerous high-level corruption cases have been filed in recent years, but many have yet to see a verdict, including corruption and bribery proceedings against former president Ivo Sanader.

Politics in the first half of 2017 revolved in large part around demands by the opposition and the Most party for the resignation of Finance Minister Zdravko Marić over conflict-of-interest allegations; they claimed that he had long been aware of serious financial troubles at his previous employer, the agribusiness giant Agrokor, which had come under government administration due to its precarious financial position. Most left the government after refusing to support Marić in a

parliamentary no-confidence measure, which he narrowly survived. Separately, international bodies including the European Commission have called for greater efforts to eliminate malfeasance in public procurement processes.

C3. 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 includes a proportionality and public-interest test designed to determine a balance between reasons for disclosing information and reasons for restricting it, and establishes an independent information commissioner to monitor compliance. However, government bodies do not always release requested information in a timely manner.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 49 / 60 (-1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 13 / 16 (-1)

D1. 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 harassment and occasional attacks. In May 2017, a journalist was assaulted by the mayor of Požega. And in October, a journalist for the country's public broadcaster received a death threat after reporting on refugees.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 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 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 World War II.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 3 / 4 (-1)

In June 2017, students and teachers protested against the government's stalling of the planned modernization of Croatia's education system. The reforms began in 2015 and emphasize a focus on skill development over rote memorization, give teachers increased autonomy, update badly outdated history curriculum, and include modules on sex and health education, among others. The reforms, which enjoyed broad public support, have been delayed under the HDZ, which has moved to install its own members into the group tasked with developing the policies, including extremely conservative members opposed to sex education. Protests against the delays took place in over a dozen cities, with demonstrators expressing concern that the HDZ may be attempting to politicize the new curricula, or that it could abandon the modernization plan.

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 due to the government's reluctance to implement a popular program aimed at modernizing the country's outdated education system.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

People are generally free to engage in discussions of a sensitive nature without fearing surveillance or retribution.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 12 / 12**E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4**

Freedom of assembly is protected and respected in Croatia.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 4 / 4

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector in Croatia remains robust and active.

E3. 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: 11 / 16**F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4**

While judicial independence is generally respected, there have been recent concerns about the influence of far-right-wing groups on the judiciary. For example, in July 2017, a court reversed a 1945 conviction of an academic who was found to be 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 ruling HDZ, while the courts maintain that they are redressing partisan rulings of the Yugoslav communist courts.

F2. 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.

The International Commission on Missing Persons 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. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Violence by state and nonstate actors is uncommon. However, there were several reports of police violence against migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers during the year, primarily at the Serbian border. Prison conditions do not meet international standards due to overcrowding and inadequate medical care.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

There are concerns that the increasing visibility of far-right, nationalist groups in everyday life, and occasional moves by the government suggesting endorsement of such groups, effectively encourages discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. In 2017, such groups continued efforts to rehabilitate icons and slogans associated with the Ustaša. For example, during the year, a plaque with a fascist-era slogan appeared on a building near the WWII-era Jasenovac

concentration camp, where some 83,000 Serbs, Jews, Roma and antifascists had been killed. The plaque became *cause célèbre* for Croatia's far-right, who were buttressed in their attempts to preserve it when the president appeared to endorse it in September, saying the slogan at the center of the controversy was not a fascist salute but "an old Croatian greeting." Nevertheless, the plaque was removed that month.

Ethnic and religious minorities in Croatia face discrimination. Some officials have sought to discourage the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in signage in areas with high concentrations of ethnic Serbs. Both Serb and Jewish community leaders boycotted state-sponsored Holocaust remembrances in 2016 and 2017, due to perceived HDZ support of revisionism for the World War II-era fascist government. Roma have poor access to primary and secondary education.

The LGBT community continues to face discriminatory rhetoric by influential right-wing groups.

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

Croatian authorities continue pushing asylum seekers into Serbia without offering them access to asylum procedures.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 13 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

Freedom of movement is protected by the constitution and upheld in practice.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 3 / 4

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

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

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, but same-sex couples may not adopt children.

Domestic violence remains a concern. Convictions for rape and domestic violence can bring lengthy prison terms. However, police sometimes fail to adhere to recommended procedures for handling reports of domestic violence.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

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. However, the government continues to make efforts to better identify victims of trafficking and to provide services to them.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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