

Document #2088503

# Freedom House

## Freedom in the World 2023 - Croatia

FREE

84

/ 100

Political Rights 35 / 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 2022

- Construction Minister Darko Horvat was arrested in February over his suspected involvement in a plan to route government subsidies to companies that did not qualify, prompting Prime Minister Andrej Plenković to dismiss him from the cabinet. In October, the Croatian anticorruption authority indicted Horvat and three other former ministers over their alleged participation, along with three officials and a former mayor.
- In August, authorities arrested five people over their alleged involvement in a scheme to resell natural gas at inflated prices. The scheme affected energy firm INA, which the government maintains a significant minority stake in. Opposition lawmakers called on Plenković and the cabinet to resign over the affair in September, noting that supporters of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) allegedly took part.
- In July, the European Union (EU) approved Croatia's application to use the euro as its currency, replacing the kuna. Croatia is due to use the euro and join the Schengen Area, where member states do not employ internal border checks, in 2023.

## 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. 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, winning 52.7 percent of the vote. Voter turnout was 55 percent.

The prime minister is head of government and is appointed by the president with parliamentary approval. Andrej Plenković, who chairs the conservative HDZ, remained prime minister after the party won the July 2020 legislative elections.

A2 0-4 pts

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

Members of the 151-seat, unicameral Hrvatski sabor (Croatian Parliament) are elected to four-year terms.

The HDZ captured 66 seats in the July 2020 parliamentary elections, which enabled it to form a coalition government with two smaller parties. The main opposition party, the SDP, won 41 seats, the far-right Homeland Movement secured 16, and the left-wing We Can took 8. Though the elections were deemed free and fair, ethnic Serb candidates experienced harassment during the campaign.

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 concerns about the use of public funds for political campaigns persist, the State Election Commission 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 polls: the far-right Homeland Movement and the left-wing We Can.

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 parliamentary seats and is generally able to operate free from restrictions or intimidation. However, the HDZ has dominated politics and draws support from the Catholic Church, veterans, and a growing number of conservative nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The SDP-led bloc has won the most seats in only two parliamentary elections since 1991, although the country was headed by non-HDZ executives between 2000 and 2015. SDP-backed candidates served as president from 2010 to 2015 and again since 2020. President Milanović, who was elected in 2020, campaigned from the right instead of relying only on the SDP's traditional base of support.

### **B3 0-4 pts**

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

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

The influential Catholic Church associates with conservative and far-right civil society groups, which have become more influential in local politics in recent years. Veterans' groups are also significant, especially in regard to the still-contentious discourse surrounding the 1991–95 Independence War 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 3 / other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 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 (BiH).

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 the 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 won seats in the parliament.

Ethnic Serbs in public office are subjected to mistreatment, with Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) leader Milorad Pupovac receiving verbal attacks in recent years. SDS election posters have been defaced during both 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 determine the policies of the government?** 4 / 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?** 2 / 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. Croatia's anticorruption mechanisms have been strengthened during the 21st century, with specialized anticorruption courts being established and the Bureau for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime (USKOK) gaining new powers. Nevertheless, local NGOs have observed that corruption has worsened since Croatia's 2013 accession into the EU.

Croatian and European authorities continued to grapple with major corruption cases in 2022. In February, police arrested Construction Minister Darko Horvat, who was accused of directing subsidies to companies that did not qualify for support when he held a different cabinet post. Prime Minister Plenković dismissed Horvat but called on prosecutors to explain Horvat's arrest, calling it disproportionate. Also in February, Deputy Prime Minister and SDSS member Boris Milošević resigned his post after being implicated in Horvat's alleged manipulation of subsidies. In October, Horvat, Milošević, former labor minister Josip Aladrović, and former minister Tomislav Tolušić were all indicted by the USKOK, along with three officials and a former mayor.

In August 2022, authorities arrested five people over their suspected involvement in a natural-gas reselling scheme that affected energy firm INA, in which the government holds a large minority stake. Authorities also froze the individuals' assets, which totaled over 800 million kuna (\$110.8 million), that month. Opposition parliamentarians called on Plenković and the cabinet to resign in September, noting the involvement of HDZ supporters in the alleged scheme.

In late December 2022, the European Public Prosecutor's Office indicted former minister Gabrijela Žalac, former Central Finance and Contracting Agency head Tomislav Petric, and two businesspeople for corruption. The four were originally arrested in 2021 over allegations that they manipulated public tenders. In November 2022, the Telegram.hr news outlet reported that Žalac used public funds for a birthday party in 2019.

*Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to systemic corruption among government ministers and officials.*

**C3 0-4 pts**

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

The 2013 Law on the Right of Access to Information 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. Government officials and businesspeople have also interacted in a nontransparent manner; in 2017, for example, a government minister crafted a law addressing the fate of troubled agricultural company Agrokor in private, unofficial meetings.

## 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 face threats, harassment, and occasional attacks—sometimes at the hands of police—which has created an atmosphere of self-censorship. A 2020 European Commission report warned about deteriorating media freedoms in Croatia. 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. In 2021, the EFJ criticized the widespread use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) in Croatia.

Prime Minister Plenković and President Milanović have both engaged in acrimonious exchanges with local and regional media. In a video recorded in 2019 and made public in September 2022, Plenković threatened to assault the late journalist Mislav Bago for interrupting him.

#### D2 0-4 pts

**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, which 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 ruled Croatia during the Second World War. Far-right groups, newspapers, and academics have advanced revisionist accounts of the Ustaša period in recent years.

#### D3 0-4 pts

**Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 3 / 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 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, 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 in human rights– and governance-related work? 4 / 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. 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. Judges have also faced corruption allegations in recent years; three judges were arrested in 2021 over bribery accusations lodged by football club administrator Zdravko Mamić, who himself was convicted of corruption in absentia in 2018.

**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.

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 0-4 pts**

**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. In March 2022, however, a Soviet-era drone crashed in a Zagreb neighborhood. The device's operator was unknown as it bore both Soviet and Ukrainian markings, but no one was injured in the crash.

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. A group of NGOs criticized the government for lacking a comprehensive human rights policy in 2018 and warned of the continuing deterioration of protection of human rights in the country, especially for marginalized groups and women. According to a 2021 Council of Europe report on the protection of national minorities, ethnic Serbs continue to face high levels of discrimination.

Analysts have expressed concerns that the increasing visibility of far-right, nationalist groups has allowed discriminatory rhetoric to spread. 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. The Croatian Defense Forces (HOS), a right-wing militia that uses Ustaša-era and other fascist symbols, has maintained ties with HDZ members in recent years. In April 2022, a group of students in the Slavonia region were photographed wearing HOS paraphernalia and offering fascist salutes with their teacher present.

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

Police have engaged in violence, including sexual violence and torture in some cases, against migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Police have also engaged in illegal pushbacks along the border with BiH. Pushbacks are reportedly less common than in the past, but the practice persists; in a May 2022 report, the Border Violence Monitoring Network noted that Croatian police entered BiH territory while pushing people back across the border.

## **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 businesses 3 / 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 size 3 / 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. In April 2021, an administrative court in Zagreb ruled that same-sex couples have the right to adopt children. The ruling was confirmed by a higher court in May 2022.

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 sentences of one year or less. Police sometimes fail to adhere to recommended procedures for handling domestic violence reports.

In 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 offered 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.

Abortion is legal, but is restricted to cases of rape, incest, or serious health problems for the pregnant person or fetus after 10 weeks. Croatian doctors face pressure to refrain from performing the procedure. In May 2022, a Croatian woman whose fetus was diagnosed with an aggressive tumor was only able to receive an abortion after a medical commission ruled in her favor. Four hospitals had declined to assist the woman, who was advised to travel to Slovenia.

#### **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 appropriate consideration in court cases.

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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 +43 1 589 00 583  
F +43 1 589 00 589  
info@ecoi.net

Contact  
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F.A.Q.  
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