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Freedom House (Author)

Nations in Transit 2023 - Croatia

SEMI-CONSOLIDATED DEMOCRACY

54

/ 100

Democracy Percentage 54.17 / 100

Democracy Score 4.25 / 7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

54 / 100 Semi-Consolidated Democracy

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale,

where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic. [See the methodology.](#)

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Status Changes in 2023

- No changes in 2023.

Executive Summary

In 2022, Croatia faced ongoing challenges with corruption, media freedom, government accountability, local democratic governance, the judiciary, and other independent institutions. All of this was a continuation from previous years, with the corruption issue reaching new depths.

The country's COVID-19 rules were further relaxed and largely abandoned to support the summer tourist season and ease the increased public resistance towards new or existing restrictions. However, the numbers of hospitalizations and deaths due to COVID-19 remained high, with the consequences of long COVID still largely unknown. The government's laissez-faire attitude was highlighted by the COVID-related death of prominent index.hr journalist Vladimir Matijanić,¹ where

the government denied any responsibility and claimed the health system had functioned appropriately.²

Mistreatment of migrants at the Croatian border was ostensibly mitigated through the establishment of an independent monitoring mechanism for border police. However, civil society organizations criticized this strategy for its weaknesses and flawed process due to several major restrictions, including prohibiting civil society observers along Croatia's "green border" unless the police were present, putting pressure on monitors.³ Despite this, the government denied conducting pushbacks, confirming that everything was being done according to regulations and citing the European Union (EU)'s approval of Croatia's Schengen area entry in November as proof of compliance.

The year witnessed limited election activity, with only a few early local elections and one local referendum taking place. The most important local election was in Split, Croatia's second-largest city, where the incumbent liberal mayor, Ivica Puljak, won and increased the number of city council members from his Centar (Center) party. The referendum in Pula highlighted once again the problems with the country's referendum legislation, especially the high threshold required for referendum results to be binding. Political actors agreed on Croatia's need for electoral redistricting, but there

was no agreement on how to approach such a reform. Additionally, intraparty conflicts in the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) further hindered any real progress on the important issue of redistricting. By contrast, reform of the referendum legislation proceeded more smoothly: almost all political parties agreed on the need to reform the process and align local and national referendum rules, but there was no consensus on whether to tighten or relax the regulations.

The judiciary remains one of the weakest elements within the Croatian political system. Inter-institutional flaws concerning the executive branch and intra-institutional conflicts within the Supreme Court persisted in 2022. Actors hostile to the new Supreme Court president, elected in late 2021, continued to undermine his timid attempts at reforms. The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) remained the most important prosecutorial body, while the State Prosecutor's Office was slow to act on high-level corruption cases.

Media independence remained precarious in 2022. Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), overt and covert pressures from both local and national politicians, and financial pressures via state advertising

were the gravest threats to the survival of media outlets during the year.

As in previous years, corruption issues—especially those involving high-level government officials, state enterprises, EU funds reimbursement institutions, and local authorities—continued to overwhelm the already ineffective prosecutor's office. Only the involvement of the EPPO, heretofore limited to cases linked to the mismanagement of EU funds, as well as media attention brought some scandals to the public's awareness. The second half of 2022 witnessed a corruption scandal involving the oil and gas company INA Group, where more than €100 million were embezzled from INA's natural gas business⁴ by INA executive Damir Škugor and others.⁵ The scandal led to the arrest of lawyer Josip Šurjak, head of the Croatian Bar Association.⁶ This scandal poses a significant problem for Prime Minister Andrej Plenković's ruling HDZ, as both Škugor and the Supervisory Board president, under whose oversight more than a billion Kuna were stolen from INA, were HDZ members.⁷

Despite allegations to the contrary, the HDZ-led government, helmed by PM Plenković, claimed during the year that it was combatting corruption. Officials dismissed all such criticisms, attacking opposition parties and non-aligned media—as well as independent

institutions like the Anticorruption Council, which shed light on government-linked corruption—accusing them of disloyalty and endangering national security.

President Zoran Milanović (Independent, formerly SDP) clashed during the year with PM Plenković and others, including the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs and Minister of Defense, their collective rancor stoking previous conflicts. But the contentious atmosphere also reflects larger ideological, political, and societal divides between the HDZ fusion of Christian democracy and nationalism and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) brand of social democracy and progressive liberalism.

Even so, this political conflict managed not to spill over into areas previously associated with nationalist forces, like army affairs and Croatia's position towards Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). In fact, President Milanović's position towards BiH was criticized by liberal and left-leaning factions while gaining support from more nationalistic elements. This dynamic has challenged Plenković's HDZ by showing that other political actors, besides those linked to HDZ, can advocate for the interests of Croats in BiH. It has also pushed Plenković's government further to the right on Croatia's position towards BiH, which contradicts his objective to maintain a moderate image as the Brussels representative in the region, or "man in the field." Additionally, the president's

open criticism of Croatia's involvement in training Ukrainian armed forces, as well as his skepticism of Ukraine's and the EU's chances of winning by openly confronting Putin, have created a division in the country's foreign policy. Meanwhile, HDZ has positioned itself as the unambiguous supporter of Kyiv and a critic of the Putin regime, further challenging the established stance in the leaders' ongoing political conflict.

At-A-Glance

In Croatia, national governance is democratic but dominated by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) at all levels, with HDZ head Andrej Plenković becoming the country's longest-serving prime minister in 2022.⁸ Elections are free, but uneven electoral districts need reform to ensure voter equality. Local and national referendum rules are not aligned and face additional obstacles from local governments and the Constitutional Court. While Croatian civil society is active and robust, government hostility towards some long-established, critical CSOs and lack of a national strategy and funding streams endanger its stability. Media independence in Croatia has incrementally deteriorated, with SLAPPs threatening media viability as the HDZ-controlled public broadcaster dominates the information space. The judiciary remains the weakest branch of government, with the new Supreme Court

president immediately encountering opposition to reforms. Corruption continues to be the country's most pressing issue, with high-level scandals involving EU funds disbursement brought to light by the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO).

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, 4.25 / effectiveness, and accountability of the 7.00 legislative and executive branches.

- The most important issue in Croatia in 2022 arose towards the end of the year involving the embezzlement of funds from the oil and gas company INA Group by HDZ members (see "Corruption"). Together with others cases from the previous year and several resignations from the government and administration in 2022, this fraught situation allowed the opposition and critics to paint the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) as a criminal enterprise with an ingrained culture of corruption, which the party's leader, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, vehemently rejected. However, HDZ remained popular in public polls and continued to lead with comfortable margins as a right-of-center party.⁹

- Meanwhile, Croatia's left-of-center parties faced internal conflicts and struggled to establish themselves as a credible alternative to HDZ. The intraparty strife and split in the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 2021 weakened its position in the Sabor, Croatia's 151-seat unicameral parliament. The green-left party Možemo! (We Can!) encountered problems in governing the capital Zagreb, including negative press,¹⁰ system blockades,¹¹ employee protests,¹² and court challenges by vested interests.¹³ The party's defeat in a Pula referendum resulted in its removal from local government,¹⁴ revealing limitations in the predominantly civic sector-based green-left platform. To consolidate its position, Možemo! merged with like-minded parties, like Zagreb je NAŠ (Zagreb is OURS),¹⁵ aiming to consolidate left-green votes. Meanwhile, right-wing political parties continued to criticize the government, particularly Most (Bridge). Hrvatski Suverenisti (Croatian Sovereignists) experienced another major split, leaving them to give their support to the dwindling Plenković majority in the parliament.
- The long-awaited restructuring of the government was partially implemented during the year. However, PM Plenković's leadership encountered difficulties in filling positions with qualified

individuals. Some relatively unknown HDZ members were appointed to ministerial posts in an attempt to balance opportunities for younger candidates with Plenković's desire to remain the most powerful political actor in the country.[16](#) [17](#)

- HDZ, under Plenković, continued attacking opposition parties,[18](#) accusing them of disloyalty, foreign leanings, and working against Croatia. During the year, the PM pointed to Russian influence on Croatian opposition parties, citing their reluctance to stand behind his government uncritically.[19](#)
- Tensions between PM Plenković and President Zoran Milanović (Independent, formerly SDP) intensified in 2022, particularly over the war in Ukraine and Croatia's relations with neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The political conflict slowed activities in major policy areas, including foreign policy, where several important ambassador positions remained unfilled.[20](#) [21](#)
- President Milanović criticized the government's position on Russia's aggression in Ukraine, blocking calls to train Ukrainian soldiers in Croatia, and refusing to participate in major international meetings related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, including a visit by U.S. House speaker Nancy Pelosi.[22](#) The HDZ-led government tried to bypass

Milanović's objections and attempted to circumvent his presidential powers by looking for a two-thirds majority in the parliament, which it failed to secure. This proved to be one of the most significant defeats for Plenković since his election in 2016.[23](#) [24](#)

- The reconstruction process following the 2020 earthquakes in Zagreb and the Banija region[25](#) faced substantial delays and drew criticism for the government's slow efforts to assist people in returning to their refurbished homes.[26](#) The government and administration received public backlash for their inability to efficiently utilize the majority of funds allocated by the European Commission for reconstruction, primarily due to bureaucratic obstacles.[27](#)
- Croatia's COVID-19 response became even more lenient in 2022, with the government relaxing[28](#) already liberal recommendations in order to boost summer tourism and in response to right-wing criticism, including two citizen initiatives supported by Most.[29](#)

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the 5.00 / functioning of multiparty systems, and 7.00 popular participation in the political process.

- In 2022, the most notable elections in Croatia were for mayor and city council of Split, the country's second-largest city. Ivica Puljak, the incumbent mayor from the small, liberal Centar (Center) party, won by a large margin against the HDZ candidate in the July runoff. Puljak secured more than double the votes compared to the HDZ runner-up amid low second-round turnout (around 28 percent).³⁰ His coalition also won a greater number of seats on the city council, enhancing its ability to govern. HDZ, however, manipulated existing rules to their advantage³¹ by preventing the deputy mayor from acting as mayor until the elections and insisting on a government-appointed caretaker in the interim. This decision was criticized by law and administration experts,³² although the government was undeterred.
- Towards the end of the year, a local referendum took place in Pula advanced by some local parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) to stop the construction of a luxury hotel in Pula's green belt and other coastal development in the city center. With opposition to the referendum from most political parties, including the mayor, and limited media coverage³³ due to stringent local referendum laws, the initiative ultimately failed from low voter turnout of only 22 percent.³⁴

- The Pula referendum underscored disparities between local and national referendum rules, promoting wider discussion about referendum reform. The governing coalition, with partial opposition support, started the parliamentary procedure to change the constitution regarding such rules. However, the opposition majority insisted on linking the proposed referendum changes to reforms in other areas, like constitutionally guaranteeing abortion rights, a proposal rejected by HDZ, resulting in a stalemate.[35](#)
- The primary electoral issue in 2022 revolved around electoral laws, particularly discrepancies between the country's number of voters and its electoral district mandates. This problem stems in part from gerrymandering, but is mainly attributed to negative demographic trends and high levels of emigration from eastern parts of Croatia, which has led to HDZ overrepresentation in recent years. Amid pressure to finally resolve the electoral districting issue, several proposals emerged,[36](#) causing internal conflicts within HDZ,[37](#) while others aimed to maximize HDZ's electoral advantage.[38](#)
- The Constitutional Court continued its long-standing position of pronouncing almost all citizen-

initiated referendums unconstitutional in 2022, including two proposals by the right-wing opposition party Most. The first proposal involved constitutional changes to rules regulating the announcement and promulgation of the “extraordinary state” of governance under extraordinary circumstances.³⁹ The second proposal concerned whether government bodies or the parliament has the right to encroach on the freedoms of citizens (regarding COVID-linked decisions), with Most advocating for these rules to be determined by the parliament rather than by a government-appointed “expert body,” namely, the National Headquarters of Civil Protection.⁴⁰

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups. 5.25 / 7.00

- Civil society in Croatia faced numerous challenges in 2022, including a decline in funds and a hostile atmosphere created by the government,⁴¹ even within supposedly independent agencies and bodies like the National Endowment and the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs.⁴²

- The European Commission's 2022 Rule of Law Report noted that, although some preparatory steps were taken, the government had made little progress in adopting the new National Plan for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development 2021-27,⁴³ which was initially to be adopted in 2016 after HDZ took back the parliament.⁴⁴ This lack of action demonstrated the ruling party's disinterest in supporting the development of a robust civic sector in the country.
- The government also failed to work with long-established, mainstream CSOs that have a track record in democratization and human rights work. It disregarded their input on new laws and failed to address their calls for further democratic reforms.⁴⁵ In fact, there were signs that the government preferred instead to work with more recently established right-wing and conservative organizations.
- The government continued to limit opportunities for CSOs by disregarding EU funding mechanisms, especially in the areas of anticorruption and civic education, jeopardizing the viability of CSOs working in these sectors.⁴⁶ The government made promises to open grants but then repeatedly postponed them, creating a precarious

environment for the entire civic sector and its employees.

- Despite these challenges, CSOs persevered in their work to expose governmental wrongdoing, corruption, and human rights abuses, especially regarding migrants, and overall threats to democracy in Croatia. The Zagreb-based nonprofit Gong has been vocal in addressing problems with the electoral law and law on electoral districts, offering expert-based proposals for solutions. Together with the Croatian Journalists' Association, they continued to highlight the problem of misinformation in the media and widespread use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). Several CSOs focused on defending local interests, ranging from earthquake reconstruction in Banija to resisting potential privatization of beaches in Dalmatia.⁴⁷ The Center for Peace Studies and other organizations advocating for migrants shed light on difficulties faced by migrants crossing the Croatia-BiH border and their inhumane, illegal treatment by Croatian law enforcement.⁴⁸

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, 3.75 / including libel laws, harassment of 7.00 journalists, and editorial independence; the

operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

- During 2022, outlets grappled with a new law on electronic media adopted in late 2021 despite criticism from both the media and CSOs. The government defended the new law as a positive step towards diversifying the sources of media financing.⁴⁹ This goes against both the European Commission's 2022 Rule of Law report⁵⁰ and Croatian civil society's demand for greater media ownership transparency.
- The European Commission's Rule of Law Report noted concerns over the political independence of Croatia's Council for Electronic Media, the country's media watchdog, and management of the public service broadcaster HRT.⁵¹ These concerns reflect an ongoing trend of government interference in media independence, both overt and covert, including abuse of state enterprises and state advertising.⁵² The issue is particularly problematic at the local level,^{53 54} where media reliant on local funding can become platforms for local political and business figures and their propaganda.⁵⁵
- SLAPPs brought by prominent politicians, judges,⁵⁶ and business persons remain a major problem for the media, especially small, nonprofit,

and independent outlets.⁵⁷ Croatia has gained notoriety as one of the EU states with the highest incidence of SLAPPs,⁵⁸ lawsuits that aim to censor and intimidate media outlets and other sources of information in the public interest. The situation has increasingly worsened, with the number of SLAPPS rising annually.⁵⁹

- The effectiveness of SLAPP suits is evident in judgments issued by first-instance courts, which frequently rule against journalists and media.⁶⁰ The plaintiffs are typically prominent individuals, including business leaders, politicians,⁶¹ judges,⁶² and, in recent years, COVID skeptics.⁶³ Although many of these rulings are eventually overturned on appeal or brought to the Constitutional Court,⁶⁴ they nonetheless contribute to self-censorship and financial burdens on media outlets. With almost 1,000 ongoing SLAPPs⁶⁵ against journalists in Croatia, media workers and owners face immense pressure. In a recent case, journalist Davorka Blažević was fined an amount equivalent to eight months' wages for writing an article in 2015 regarding Supreme Court judge Senka Klarić-Baranović, despite merely restating publicly known and undisputed facts.⁶⁶ The journalistic community and the public supported Blažević by raising funds to pay the fine,

and the Croatian Journalists' Association vowed to compile a "list of shame" featuring all judges involved in defamation lawsuits.

- Government officials, especially Prime Minister Plenković and other HDZ members,⁶⁷ continued to criticize the media for their coverage of such topics as corruption scandals, mismanagement of earthquake recovery, and police brutality against migrants. They argue that these issues are exaggerated and avert public attention from government successes,⁶⁸ accusing the media of conspiring to undermine public trust in political institutions.⁶⁹
- Despite multiple court losses⁷⁰ in wrongful termination cases, HRT, the public broadcaster, continued protracted legal battles with its employee and president of the Croatian Journalists' Association, Hrvoje Zovko.⁷¹ This move underscored the lack of change in HRT's leadership, despite a management overhaul at the end of 2021⁷² due to the corruption-related arrest of the former HRT head.⁷³

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local 4.50 / governmental bodies; and the transparency 7.00 and accountability of local authorities.

- Local self-governance in Croatia remains one of the major sources of decline in the country's democratic culture and erosion of trust in political institutions. This stems from multiple reasons, including pressure on media that rely on local funding, clientelism within local public-owned enterprises, and sheer mismanagement of resources resulting in the impoverishment of local communities. For example, the newly elected mayor of Split found that the city had neglected to collect rent from government-owned real estate leased to local enterprises, mostly in the tourist and hospitality sectors, for almost a decade.⁷⁴ Additionally, the Banija earthquake reconstruction process exemplified how a combination of local and national mismanagement had put some citizens in such untenable circumstances that many were forced to migrate.
- The year 2022 witnessed a continuation of public misconduct by local leaders, including physical altercations,⁷⁵ illegal construction,⁷⁶ diversion of public funds to CSOs linked to officials or their parties,⁷⁷ mismanagement of public funds,⁷⁸ corruption in handling local finances,⁷⁹ and abuse of office for private gain.⁸⁰ The most obvious examples included Pula mayor Filip Zoričić and Murter-Kornati municipality

head Toni Turčinov. Zoričić, almost immediately after becoming Pula's non-party-aligned mayor, founded the CSO #PulaGRAD, which began working with the city and receiving public funds although the mayor insisted no conflict of interest rules were broken. By contrast, Murter-Kornati head Turčinov requested federal approval for strategic municipality projects, but these plans were revealed to also include construction on his private farm estate.

- In late 2022, a significant local issue emerged in seaside communities with the announcement of a new law that could privatize coastal areas and lead to the de facto end of the public right to access the sea. Local CSOs⁸¹ brought national attention to this issue, prompting HDZ, the party proposing the new law, to claim that it actually strengthens the right to access.⁸² The governing party even portrayed some of its local members as pioneers in defending public over private interest.⁸³
- Local communities remained prone to corruption and the misappropriation of public funds due to limited national media coverage and the weakness of local watchdogs, media, and CSOs. Local and national media almost completely ignored the Pula referendum, thus showing the extent to which both political and economic power can curtail the public

interest. However, several major scandals were unearthed, involving preferential employment practices at hospitals and the misallocation of funds for nonexistent landfills⁸⁴ and waste-processing infrastructure.⁸⁵

- The most blatant example of preferential employment occurred at a hospital in Zadar, where the most qualified candidate for a position was not even invited for an interview; when inquiring about the omission, the candidate was told the position had been reserved for the daughter of a local HDZ member.⁸⁶ Despite filing complaints with various institutions, no malfeasance was established, and the hospital head, a prominent HDZ member, initiated a smear campaign against the candidate. Considering that Zadar has been an HDZ stronghold since the 1990s, it is unsurprising that no resolution or consequences were realized.
- A major cause of many of Croatia's problems in local self-governance is the sheer number of cities and municipalities, which continue to multiply year on year despite a decreasing population. Although the government tries to incentivize functional consolidation and the merger of smaller, nonviable municipalities, political actors are often reluctant to relinquish power⁸⁷ and control of local public funds, hindering such progress.⁸⁸

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of 3.50 / equality before the law, treatment of 7.00 suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.

- In 2022, Croatia's judiciary experienced an internal conflict⁸⁹ in its Supreme Court between the new court president Radovan Dobronić, elected in late 2021, and a group of dissatisfied judges opposing his reforms, particularly related to financial transparency. This conflict escalated in July when Dobronić demoted two judges, accusing them of plotting against him.⁹⁰ The two judges were also accused by the public of being close to HDZ⁹¹ and resistant to any judicial reforms.⁹²
- During the year, the media again showcased examples of affluent and highly connected individuals who, despite being sentenced to prison terms, were spotted out in public.⁹³ This highlights how Croatia's justice system appears to favor individuals with economic and political influence. The issue was particularly notable in recent verdicts where judges considered the perpetrators' veteran status as a mitigating circumstance, resulting in lenient sentences in cases of rape⁹⁴ and domestic

abuse.⁹⁵ The public criticized this trend, especially as applied to prominent HDZ politicians,⁹⁶ although the party's Justice Minister insisted that nobody, including veterans, supported using this status as a mitigating circumstance.⁹⁷

- The difference between the State Prosecutor's Office and its EU counterpart, the EPPO, became evident during the year. The EPPO provided substantial evidence for arrests of individuals involved in EU funds fraud,⁹⁸ even when Croatian authorities claimed there was no cause for taking earlier action.⁹⁹ While limited to EU fund mismanagement, the EPPO's role served as a rare positive factor in restoring some confidence in the judiciary,¹⁰⁰ although public trust in the judicial system in Croatia remains among the lowest in the EU. This lack of public trust has been exacerbated by the slow resolution of major cases involving politicians—especially evident in the prolonged legal process for former PM and HDZ head Ivo Sanader, which commenced for the third time in 2022 despite Sanader's war-profiteering offenses having occurred in 1991–95 and arrest more than a decade ago.¹⁰¹ In the end, the court's acquittal of Sanader in October, which acknowledged corruption but claimed no damage to Croatia due

to a foreign bank's payment of the bribe, met with widespread criticism.¹⁰²

- PM Plenković continued to publicly criticize and pressure the State Prosecutor and her office, especially following the arrest warrants for several prominent HDZ members, including former construction minister Darko Horvat.¹⁰³ Plenković demanded an explanation for the timing and manner of the arrest,¹⁰⁴ fueling criticism that the prosecutor's office is influenced by the political class. Reports suggested that the State Prosecutor's Office delayed an indictment against government vice-president Boris Milošević from the junior coalition partner in early 2022 to prevent the collapse of the government.¹⁰⁵ The media indicated that Plenković also sought information from the State Prosecutor's Office regarding the new construction minister, Ivan Paladina, adding concerns about executive branch pressure on the office.¹⁰⁶
- The European Commission's Rule of Law Report, although somewhat critical, noted that 2022 legislative changes had granted more independence to independent bodies, such as the State Judicial Council and State Attorney's Council, in the selection of judges, marking a positive step towards strengthening the Croatian

judiciary.¹⁰⁷ However, caution is warranted due to problems such bodies, especially the State Judicial Council, have caused over the years, including outright disregard of Constitutional Court decisions involving judge appointments.¹⁰⁸

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives. 3.50 / 7.00

- Corruption, clientelism, nepotism, and graft remained major problems in Croatia in 2022. The European Commission's Rule of Law index¹⁰⁹ indicated that the perception among experts and the business class of the level of corruption in the public sector remains high, with only marginal improvements.¹¹⁰
- The most important issue in 2022 in Croatia occurred towards the end of the year involving the siphoning of funds from INA Group, an oil and gas company jointly owned by the Croatian government and the Hungarian company MOL. Involving one of the largest amounts of embezzled funds in the country's history,¹¹¹ the scandal once again implicated HDZ, with one of its members playing a pivotal role in the corruption

scheme.¹¹² This incident followed the 2021 Supreme Court verdict in the so-called FIMI Media case, where former HDZ president and prime minister Ivo Sanader received a seven-year prison sentence, and HDZ was fined 3.5 million Kuna as a responsible party.¹¹³

- During the year, officials persisted in their struggle with the Commission for the Resolution of Conflicts of Interest.¹¹⁴ The government doubled the workload of the independent body without providing sufficient personnel and financial capacities,¹¹⁵ effectively marginalizing it even further. The impending election of new members leaves the fate of this independent institution uncertain.¹¹⁶
- The government continued fulfilling recommendations set by the EU and other international bodies¹¹⁷ by implementing necessary reforms yet without a genuine commitment to meaningful structural changes.¹¹⁸ An example of this is the adoption of the ethics code for the government and the Sabor, wherein government officials¹¹⁹ (and the governing majority on the parliamentary Constitutional Committee) are themselves responsible for determining violations of the ethics code.^{120 121}

- The government was persistent in undermining independent institutions and parliamentary bodies in 2022. Led by PM Plenković, current and former¹²² government officials refused to testify before the opposition-led parliamentary Anticorruption Council in the case of the INA scandal, accusing it of unconstitutional behavior and politicization.¹²³
- At the same time, Plenković disclaimed any responsibility in recent corruption scandals, asserting ignorance and distancing himself from implicated individuals who were no longer part of his government or party. Instead, he shifted the focus to terrorism threats¹²⁴ and his government's work in fighting inflation and energy price hikes.¹²⁵ However, 2022 gave ample evidence of HDZ members engaging in corruption and clientelism within governmental institutions,¹²⁶ the public health sector,¹²⁷ and state enterprises.¹²⁸ The increasing number of corruption scandals coupled with a lack of political accountability from HDZ or the government led some critics to argue that the current HDZ is even worse than Sanader's party, which the court later declared responsible for large-scale siphoning of public funds to private and party coffers.¹²⁹

- Corruption in Croatia is pervasive across all levels of the political system,¹³⁰ with a particular stronghold at the local level. Here, political and economic elites exert significant control, while limited media coverage and journalistic resources also contribute to the problem. However, citizens bear some responsibility for perpetuating corruption by either reelecting the same candidates or voting for new candidates from the same political party, despite clear judicial evidence (and, in some cases, even admissions of guilt) of corruption. This points to an undeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation in the election process at the local level, which enables those interested in maintaining the status quo to wield more power.
- The EPPO's involvement brought some positive developments in combating corruption in Croatia, with the body issuing several arrest warrants against high-level officials for irregularities involving the distribution of EU funds. These actions were initiated either independently by EPPO officials or in response to complaints by EU institutions or Croatian citizens, with 23 cases opened and acted upon in 2022.¹³¹

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Footnotes

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