

2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Croatia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Croatia during the year.

There were no credible reports of significant human rights abuses.

The government took credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

Section 1.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

A. ARBITRARY DEPRIVATION OF LIFE AND OTHER UNLAWFUL OR POLITICALLY MOTIVATED KILLINGS

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year.

B. DISAPPEARANCE

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities; however, approximately 1,800 missing person cases from the 1991-1995 Homeland War remained unresolved. The government made efforts to investigate and punish those responsible. Progress on missing persons remained slow primarily due to bilateral political challenges with Serbia. The government continued to seek Serbia's assistance in resolving outstanding cases.

On August 30, the International Day of the Disappeared, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic stated on social media it was the country's political and humanitarian duty to find missing citizens.

C. TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN, OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT, AND OTHER RELATED ABUSES

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, and there were no credible reports that government officials employed them.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Some prison conditions were inadequate due to an increasing trend of overcrowding and a shortage of healthcare and other professionals.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Gross overcrowding in prisons was a problem. The Office of the Ombudsperson's 2022 annual report noted an increasing trend of overcrowding in most of the country's prisons. Prisoner complaints related to the availability of adequate healthcare increased. Most prisons did not have staff doctors but instead provided services through labor contracts. Prisoners frequently alleged that dental care was primarily limited to tooth extraction.

Inmates alleged they were denied legislatively mandated rights. They noted in particular slow responses to relocation requests. With the exception of Sibenik prison, as of the end of 2022 the occupancy rate of all prisons in the country was more than 100 percent. The most egregious cases of overcrowding were reported in prisons in Osijek (205 percent capacity), followed by Karlovac (170 percent capacity), and Zadar (153 percent capacity). There were no reports of extensive prisoner-to-prisoner violence or gang activity, although some prisoners expressed fear for their safety and reported threats from other prisoners. The ombudsperson's report assessed that although institutions took measures aimed at preventing interprisoner violence, the measures were still primarily reactive rather than preventative. Additionally, the report noted staff shortages in penal institutions.

Administration: Authorities investigated credible allegations of mistreatment through the Office of the Ombudsperson, which issued recommendations to improve conditions for prisoners. The ombudsperson's report noted allegations by some Romani inmates of judicial police officers allegedly insulting and belittling them.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring by independent nongovernmental observers. The Office of the Ombudsperson carried out tasks specified by the independent National Preventive Mechanism (NPM), the national body for the prevention of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment in institutions where individuals were, or could be, deprived of their liberty. The NPM conducted monitoring visits to police stations, police detention units, transit reception centers for migrants, prisons, psychiatry clinics, and psychiatric wards in hospitals.

In July a delegation from the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (SPT) visited prisons, police stations, and other facilities to assess the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty. The delegation also accompanied members of the NPM during their visits to a prison and a police detention facility. The SPT concluded the country made progress in improving detention conditions; however, it also noted more effective measures were needed to address the problem of overcrowding.

Improvements: The government took steps during the year to improve prison or detention center conditions. Authorities improved the energy efficiency of the prisons in Karlovac and Varazdin and renovated penitentiaries in Pozega and in Lipovica-Popovaca, which created new accommodation units for more than 200 prisoners. In April the minister of justice and public administration signed an agreement to construct a new penitentiary in Gospic, with capacity for 400 prisoners, maximum-security capabilities, and what the ministry claimed would be "the highest human rights standards."

D. ARBITRARY ARREST OR DETENTION

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

Other than those apprehended during the commission of a crime, persons were arrested with warrants issued by a judge or prosecutor based on evidence. Prosecutors were permitted to hold suspects for up to 48 hours in detention without charging them with a crime. Upon the request of prosecutors, an investigative judge was allowed to extend investigative detention for an additional

36 hours. Authorities informed detainees promptly of charges against them. The law required a detainee be brought promptly before an investigative judge and charged with a crime, and those rights were generally respected. The law limited release on bail only in cases of flight risk. In more serious cases, defendants were held in pretrial detention. Authorities allowed detainees prompt access to a lawyer of their choice or, if indigent, to one provided by the state.

E. DENIAL OF FAIR PUBLIC TRIAL

The constitution and law provided for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality. Cases of intimidation of state prosecutors, judges, and defense lawyers were isolated.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provided for the right to a fair and public trial, and the independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

Defendants in criminal cases were periodically denied the right to a timely trial due to judicial backlog and procedural inefficiencies in domestic courts. The judicial backlog was substantial, with most delayed cases pending at the municipal court level. Existing case backlogs and lengthy court case adjudications continued to raise concerns regarding judicial effectiveness. From June to the end of July, a country-wide judicial strike related to wage increase demands slowed the functioning of the judiciary further and caused the cancellation of hundreds of hearings. Lengthy trials also remained a problem. The EU Commission's annual *Rule of Law Report* released on July 5 noted that low public perception of judicial independence and challenges related to lengthy trials served to undermine the efficiency of anti-corruption efforts.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

F. TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Not applicable.

G. PROPERTY SEIZURE AND RESTITUTION

The government endorsed the Terezin Declaration but did not have adequate legal mechanisms in place to address Holocaust-era property claims for restitution. The country had not effectively compensated claimants for property seized during the Holocaust period (1941-1945) and inconsistently permitted noncitizens to file claims.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups reported the government did not make significant progress on resolving Holocaust-era claims, including for foreign citizens. The government did, however, in June hold a round of discussions with the World Jewish Restitution Organization and Jewish community to address outstanding matters. The law limited restitution of property seized during the communist era to individuals who were citizens of the country in 1996 and permitted claims to be filed only within a specified window, which closed in January 2003. The law did not provide effective compensation to persons, including Holocaust survivors, whose property was expropriated but had left the country and obtained citizenship elsewhere. A 2002 amendment to the law allowed foreign citizens to file claims if their country of citizenship had a bilateral restitution treaty with Croatia, while in 2010 the Supreme Court ruled the government

could not require such a treaty as a necessary condition for restitution. In 2011, the Ministry of Justice attempted unsuccessfully to amend the legislation to reflect this finding and reopen claims and estimated the amendment might potentially benefit more than 5,000 claimants. As of September, the government had taken no subsequent steps to amend the law.

Communal property restitution remained a problem for the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Coordinating Committee of Jewish Communities, and the Roman Catholic Church. The government reported approximately 74,000 property restitution claims filed as of September of which the government reported approximately 68,000 of those claims were resolved. The Department of State's *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act Report* to Congress, released publicly in July 2020, can be found on the Department's website: <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

H. ARBITRARY OR UNLAWFUL INTERFERENCE WITH PRIVACY, FAMILY, HOME, OR CORRESPONDENCE

The constitution and law prohibited such actions, and there were no reports the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2.

Respect for Civil Liberties

A. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, INCLUDING FOR MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND OTHER MEDIA

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right.

Freedom of Expression: The law sanctioned individuals who acted “with the goal of spreading racial, religious, sexual, national, ethnic hatred, or hatred based on the color of skin or sexual orientation or other characteristics.” Conviction for internet hate speech was punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment. The law provided for six months’ to five years’ imprisonment for conviction of organizing or leading a group of three or more persons to incite violence or hate via print media, radio, television, computer system or networks; during public gatherings; or in any other way against certain categories or groups. On April 21, parliament adopted an amendment to the Misdemeanor Law on Offences against Public Order and Peace that significantly increased fines for the public use of banned symbols and salutes.

Police arrested 25 persons in October for potential hate crimes after they sang songs affiliated with the fascist Ustasha regime (1941-1945) during a soccer match between Croatia and Turkey on October 12 in Osijek. Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic condemned the incident and stated that such behavior was done by those whose “intentions can only be the worst possible.” Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Internal Affairs Davor Bozinovic called the behavior “absolutely unacceptable.” On October 24, the Velika Gorica Municipal Court convicted five soccer fans accused of singing Ustasha-affiliated songs during an October 21 match between the Gorica and Zagreb Dinamo soccer teams. The court sentenced all five individuals to 60 days in prison, although the sentence was suspended for one year. Three of the fans received a one-year ban from Dinamo and national team matches, and the other two were not allowed to attend matches for the next two years. Three more fans were arrested. Those proceedings were ongoing at year’s end.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: Members of the press reported self-censorship due to fear of online harassment, lawsuits, upsetting politically connected individuals, or possible adverse employment effects.

Libel/Slander Laws: By law, libel and insult were criminal acts punishable by a fine. Insults were not criminally prosecuted if committed in the conduct of journalism, in a public interest, or for other justifiable reasons. The country also had a law that enabled plaintiffs to sue publishers and journalists through civil litigation, which the judiciary enforced. Journalists and publishers asserted this fostered a climate of intimidation and self-censorship in media. Damages awarded to plaintiffs by the courts in civil litigation could range from symbolic amounts to as high as several million euros, since some publishers faced multiple litigations. When plaintiffs won a case, journalists were required to pay damages and litigation costs.

On January 30, Croatian Journalists Association (CJA) President Hrvoje Zovko warned that lawsuits against journalists represented a new form of intimidation. According to a May 2 CJA survey, there were 945 lawsuits against media outlets, editors, and journalists, including 910 cases seeking an estimated combined total of €5.4 million (\$5.83 million) in alleged defamation damages. On May 3, Zovko warned the situation was “untenable” and that proceedings against journalists should stop. He alleged Croatia held the record in the EU in terms of the number of lawsuits against journalists filed by judges. Zovko noted politicians and private business leaders also filed such lawsuits.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content.

B. FREEDOMS OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

The constitution and law provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

C. FREEDOM OF RELIGION

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

D. FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THE RIGHT TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

The law provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

E. PROTECTION OF REFUGEES

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government established a system for providing protection to refugees. The Ministry of Interior worked with asylum seekers and persons granted international protection and provided access to the asylum procedure. NGOs noted reports of lengthy asylum application procedures that, in some

cases, lasted longer than one year. UNHCR asserted more than 90 percent of applicants left the country before receiving a final decision. Several NGOs noted overcrowding and a lack of medical personnel in the country's asylum reception centers. The Ministry of Interior publicly acknowledged the centers' full capacity, and in September the government began construction to build an additional reception center.

NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) publicly asserted many asylum seekers who returned from Croatia (through the readmission procedure) to centers abroad stated they were unable to request asylum and frequently alleged Croatian authorities ignored their intentions. They noted multiple applicants claimed they were unable to understand the documents presented to them by Croatian officials due to their inability to speak Croatian or English. NGOs noted detention prior to administrative return on average lasted three to six days and individuals reported accommodation conditions in the detention centers were inadequate. In some cases, individuals alleged they were provided only one meal per day and that officials confiscated their cell phones during the readmission procedure, leaving them unable to contact their families, lawyers, or NGOs.

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Domestic and international NGOs accused the country's border police of sporadic violent pushbacks of both asylum seekers and irregular migrants. NGOs were not in agreement as to the extent of the problem. Some domestic NGOs described pushbacks as "less frequent" and "less violent" compared to previous years and noted many pushbacks did not happen from inside the country. Other NGOs claimed it was difficult to assess the full scope of pushbacks since they were not present at the borders. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) noted a steady increase of pushbacks from January until June. Ministry of Interior officials contested the allegation and asserted the DRC included "administrative returns to Bosnia" as pushbacks. On May 5, Human Rights Watch accused police of regularly violently pushing back migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees to BiH without assessing their protection needs or asylum requests.

On April 6, Dutch media nonprofit Lighthouse Reports published an investigative report featuring leaked communication from a WhatsApp group chat between mid- and high-ranking Croatian border police officers in 2019 and 2020, regarding the apprehensions of more than 1,300 mostly Syrian, Pakistani, and Afghan migrants. The nonprofit alleged the messages proved the officers carried out state-authorized pushbacks. On April 6, Minister of Interior Davor Bozinovic confirmed in press comments that police used the WhatsApp group chat in relation to the 2019-2020 "Operation Corridor," but refuted pushback allegations and stated individuals who crossed into the country were all registered and offered asylum.

On April 18, a group of asylum seekers who claimed border police pushed them back into BiH in 2020 filed a lawsuit before the Constitutional Court. In the lawsuit, the asylum seekers claimed they suffered severe violence and sexual assault. The case remained pending at year's end.

Durable Solutions: During the year authorities accepted and relocated 10 refugees from Italy for resettlement under the inter-EU solidarity scheme. The government continued to participate in the joint Regional Housing Program with the Governments of BiH, Montenegro, and Serbia to contribute to the resolution of the protracted displacement of the most vulnerable persons following the 1991-1995 conflict. The program increased the number of houses provided and families assisted.

Temporary Protection: The country had a mechanism for subsidiary protection for those who did not qualify as refugees. In March 2022, the country officially activated the EU Directive on the Temporary Protection for Refugees from Ukraine and allowed individuals from Ukraine to enter the country and receive certain benefits without applying for asylum. More than 23,000 Ukrainians and third country nationals received temporary protection in the country.

The Ministry of Interior was responsible for organizing the reception and care of persons who met the conditions for temporary protection. The government provided temporarily protected individuals with accommodation, health care, access to primary and secondary education, and employment without a requirement to obtain a residence or work permit or a certificate of work

registration. The government extended temporary protection for Ukrainian citizens until March 4, 2024.

F. STATUS AND TREATMENT OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

Not applicable.

G. STATELESS PERSONS

An estimated 730 stateless persons and persons at risk of statelessness lived in the country. The Ministry of Interior was responsible for granting stateless individuals who fulfilled legal requirements residency and eventual citizenship. UNHCR advocated for the ending of statelessness in the country, including through the establishment of a stateless determination procedure. The law extended the right to social welfare to all stateless persons legally residing in the country.

Section 3.

Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: The most recent parliamentary and presidential elections were held in 2020, and European Parliament elections in 2019. National elections were widely reported to be fair and free of abuses and irregularities.

Section 4.

Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the judiciary generally implemented the law effectively. Corruption remained a problem, and there were allegations of government corruption during the year.

Corruption: The judiciary continued efforts to investigate and adjudicate high-profile corruption, including ongoing cases against some former ministers and high-level managers in state-owned companies. The judiciary generally imposed statutory penalties in cases in which there was a conviction. Investigative journalists, parliamentary opposition members, NGOs, and whistleblowers discovered and reported corruption cases, mainly related to abuse of office and manipulation of privileged information for personal gain. In most of these cases, government action came after state prosecutors initiated official investigations or formally filed indictments.

The EU Commission's annual *Rule of Law Report* released on July 5 positively emphasized the effective investigation of high-level corruption, increase in the overall number of corruption related indictments, and progress on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) convention benchmarks.

On July 11, media reported the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organized Crime initiated an investigation against the former Croatian Democratic Union Mayor of Pozega, Darko Puljasic, and the judge of the County Court of Slavonski Brod, Predrag Dragicevic, for allegedly accepting and giving bribes. The investigation focused on the period between early 2018 and the end of 2020, during which Puljasic and Dragicevic allegedly reached an agreement on mutual benefits. Puljasic reportedly provided assistance to Dragicevic in finding a new job for his son's wife and transferring his son to a different position within the Pozega-Slavonska Police Administration. Dragicevic was accused of manipulating the judicial process in favor of Puljasic. The case remained under investigation at year's end.

On September 4, the County Court of Zagreb sentenced former Head of the Zagreb City Department for Health Zvonimir Sostar, pending appeal, to four years in prison on charges that he and his associates defrauded the city budget by €5.05 million (\$5.45 million) through fictitious deals to clean sports hall ventilation systems. The court ordered asset confiscations of €1 million (\$1.08 million).

On September 28, parliament amended the Penal Code and the Law on Liability of Legal Entities for Criminal Offenses to meet the prerequisites for admission to the OECD. The amendments aligned laws with the OECD's Convention on Suppression of Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions requirements.

For additional information concerning corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5.

Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction to monitor or investigate human rights conditions or cases and publish their findings. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to the views of these groups.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The country had an ombudsperson for human rights who investigated complaints of human rights abuses, as well as three additional ombudspersons for gender equality, persons with disabilities, and children. The law stipulated parliament could not dismiss the ombudsperson for human rights because of dissatisfaction with their annual report, but it could dismiss the other three if it did not accept their annual reports. Ombudspersons said this limited their ability to do their jobs independently.

Section 6.

Discrimination and Societal Abuses

WOMEN

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape of a person, regardless of gender, including spousal rape and domestic violence. The law was enforced in most cases. Sentences ranged from fines to jail, depending on the crime's severity. Rape, including spousal rape, was

punishable by a maximum of 15 years' imprisonment. Domestic violence was punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. The law provided for stricter penalties for violence against closely related family members and violence against women. Sexual intercourse without consent was classified as rape and was punishable by three to 10 years' imprisonment. The law provided sanctions (fines and up to 90 days' imprisonment) for misdemeanor domestic violence.

The ombudsperson for gender equality's 2022 report noted an increase in the number of cases for criminal offenses of threats, domestic violence, bodily injury, and rape in comparison to 2021, while reports of serious bodily injury and intrusive behavior declined. According to the law intrusive behavior included acts of stalking, intimidation, and unwanted communication. The Croatian Women's Network submitted requests to the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration to enhance protections for women against gender-based violence and advocated for the inclusion of femicide as a distinct crime within the penal code. The Network advocated for more comprehensive legislation that covered all forms of gender-based violence against women and girls.

There were reports police perpetrated or condoned sexual assault and rape. On August 31, authorities filed criminal charges against two Licko-Senjska county police officers who were arrested for the alleged rape of a woman. At year's end, the police officers were released from investigative detention, but the criminal procedure remained ongoing. In April a group of asylum seekers alleged border authorities handed them over to masked and armed men in black uniforms who abused and sexually assaulted them.

In a September 6 evaluation, the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) recommended more measures to support women survivors of less visible forms of gender-based violence and specialized services for women survivors of sexual violence. The evaluation highlighted the lack of specialist services catering to women experiencing intersectional forms of discrimination and asserted the justice system paid insufficient attention to the impact of domestic violence on child witnesses.

Discrimination: The law provided for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. These included status and rights under laws pertaining to family, religious, and personal status; nationality; property inheritance; employment; access to credit; and owning or managing a business or property. In labor and employment, the law required equal pay for equal work. The government did not enforce the law effectively. Women often experienced discrimination in labor or employment, education, and the judicial process.

The annual report of the ombudsperson for gender equality noted discrimination complaints, which comprised two-thirds of all complaints received, came from nearly all segments of society. The report asserted women faced discrimination based on gender, motherhood, and family status in the social, public, and private spheres. In the labor market, discrimination related to age and motherhood was a problem in relation to women's social and employment status. Women regularly reported difficulty in providing sufficient evidence to prove an employer demoted them or did not renew fixed-term employment contracts due to pregnancy discrimination. The annual report of the ombudsperson for gender equality noted women from historically marginalized communities, including women with disabilities, members of national minorities, women living in rural areas, and women who were addicted to harmful substances, were particularly at risk for multiple forms of discrimination. The report noted women with disabilities faced discrimination, which reduced their possibilities of economic independence.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities. Emergency contraception was available for purchase at pharmacies by persons older than age 18 upon presenting appropriate identification. Distribution of emergency contraception was available during the clinical management of rape upon assessment of the gynecologist conducting the forensic exam within 72 hours of the reported rape. The Ministry of Health instructed every hospital to provide comprehensive reproductive health care, including to the survivors of sexual violence, and ordered that when doctors used personal ethical objections as a reason to refuse a procedure, the doctor's objection would be listed in their personnel file.

Vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities, had the ability to provide informed consent to medical treatment affecting reproductive health, including for sterilization, except for persons whose intellectual capabilities were such that they were deemed not capable to work and were assigned a caregiver, who could make this decision for them.

SYSTEMIC RACIAL OR ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

Constitutional provisions against discrimination applied to all minorities. The constitution provided a comprehensive and coherent framework for protection. Additionally, the law provided for the protection and promotion of equality and provided for protection against both direct and indirect discrimination. The government did not enforce the provisions effectively. According to the ombudsperson for human rights, ethnic discrimination was the most prevalent form of societal discrimination, particularly against Roma, Serbs, and migrants or persons of non-European descent. Of these groups, Roma faced the highest level of reported discrimination.

Despite progress on Roma community educational integration, Roma continued to report instances of discrimination and stigmatization particularly regarding employment, social acceptance, poverty, segregation, and housing. In March, media reported on the physical attack of a Romani elementary school student by non-Romani students in the town of Slavonski Brod. Media reported the school contacted the parents several days after the incident and notified them that the Romani girl had missed her classes. A hospital that offered assistance to the injured girl notified police concerning the attack, and at year's end, the police investigation continued.

Migrants and persons of non-European descent continued to be exposed to prejudice and discrimination due to their race, religion, or ethnic identity. On March 13, police in Zagreb detained a man who posted a video of himself on social media verbally assaulting a delivery man of Indian descent using racist terminology. Police promptly opened an investigation into the incident and made an initial public statement claiming the video could qualify as a criminal offense of public incitement to violence and hatred. The incident was strongly condemned by the ombudsperson. An investigation continued at year's end.

Serb national minority representatives asserted they faced discrimination at the national and local levels. The Serb National Council (SNV) alleged the Serb national minority faced various forms of discrimination, including: hate speech and calls for violence against the Serb community; continued, outstanding property restitution cases delayed due to ethnic discrimination; challenges regarding the registration of Serb minority schools in Eastern Slavonia; and vandalism of cultural monuments and Serbian Orthodox Churches in several cities. The SNV also alleged the Ministry of Veterans Affairs routinely denied war crime victim status to Serb minorities, as well as subsequent financial benefits for members of the Serb minority who were victims of war crimes committed by Croatian forces. The SNV asserted this was due to the ministry's assessment that they were "sympathizers, accessories, or participants in the aggression" simply because the victims lived in areas outside of Croatian forces' control when the crime was committed. The SNV noted 21 towns and municipalities failed to introduce dual script signage despite meeting the legal minority population threshold for their required implementation. Serb community members reported receiving death threats. Posters calling for the lynching of Serbs were occasionally displayed.

On April 30, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic attended the fourth Grand Assembly of the SNV and stated his government had strong partnership with all national minorities and the main goal of his government was to have a tolerant society. He emphasized the importance of reconciliation efforts. Prior to the assembly meeting, he hosted a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister of Serbia Ana Brnabic.

In a July report based on complaints received, field work, research, and data collected from various stakeholders, the ombudsperson noted challenges in the country related to protection against ethnic or racial discrimination. The report asserted members of the Romani community, the Serb national minority, migrants, and third country foreign workers alleged numerous violations of employment rights and denials of the right to work. It also noted incidents of reported hate crimes and hate

speech, as well as challenges in obtaining free legal aid and housing. The report highlighted the right of return for Croatian Serbs who fled during the 1990s war and advocated for the introduction of mandatory human rights education as a separate school subject and as part of civic education.

CHILDREN

Child Abuse: Child abuse, including violence within families and among peers, remained a problem. There were laws against child abuse, and the government enforced the laws effectively. The penalty for conviction of grave sexual abuse of children depended on the crime's gravity and included long-term imprisonment if the child died as a result. There was no statute of limitation for prosecution of serious criminal acts of sexual abuse and exploitation of a child. By law anyone convicted of a sexual offense against a child could, after serving their sentence, be prohibited from duties or activities involving regular contact with children if a court determined a perpetrator would likely repeat the crime. Convicted individuals could be monitored, per court order, under protective supervision after completing their sentence. The law required employers to conduct background checks before hiring employees to positions involving regular contact with children. Labor Act amendments stipulated employers working in education, employing children, or organizing activities that involved children were required to ensure employees who came into contact with children did not have prior convictions or face criminal proceedings.

The Ministry of Interior noted an increase in domestic violence against children, which the ministry stated was exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, 2020 earthquakes, and the worsened economic situation.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage was 18, and this was effectively enforced by the government. Children older than 16 were legally allowed to marry with a judge's written consent.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited commercial sexual exploitation of children and the sale, grooming, or using of children for commercial exploitation, including child sex trafficking. The law prohibited the offering or procuring of a child for commercial sex and child pornography and provided for jail sentences ranging from six months to long-term imprisonment, including for sexual exploitation of children, depending on the age of the victim and severity of the crime. Authorities enforced the law. The Ministry of Interior conducted investigations and operated a website known as Red Button for the public to report child pornography. The minimum age for consensual sex was 15.

ANTISEMITISM

The World Jewish Congress estimated the country's Jewish population at 1,700. Some Jewish community leaders continued to report historical revisionism and antisemitic rhetoric, including use of symbols affiliated with the pro-Nazi Ustasha regime (1941-1945). Jewish community leaders noted the lack of a specific penal code provision outlawing use of the Ustasha insignia and slogans exclusively. The use of Ustasha slogans and symbols could be charged as a criminal offense if combined with charges of incitement to hatred and violence. During the first 10 months of the year there were no known reports of antisemitic incidents involving violence; however, the Jewish Community did report incidents of antisemitic hate speech online.

By law attacks motivated by antisemitism were defined as hate crimes and criminal offenses. The law stipulated "anyone who by press, radio, television, computer system or network, in a public gathering or in any other way publicly incites or makes available to the public leaflets, pictures, or other material that incites violence or hatred directed towards a group of or a member of a group on the grounds of race, religion, national or ethnic group, origin, skin color, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or any other characteristics may be punished with up to three years' imprisonment" if convicted. Individuals who joined or led groups instigating such activity could also be charged with up to five years' imprisonment. The Penal Code additionally criminalized

public statements that approved, incited, or diminished the significance of acts of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity with the intention of inciting violence. The government enforced the law effectively. In January, the government adopted the legally nonbinding International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definitions of antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, and anti-Roma racism and discrimination. In March, the country began its one-year IHRA presidency.

On April 23, Prime Minister Plenkovic and President Zoran Milanovic commemorated the 78th anniversary of the inmate breakout from the World War II Jasenovac concentration camp. At the event, Prime Minister Plenkovic hailed the country's adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism and lauded parliament's adoption of increased fines for publicly displaying or saluting banned symbols and text.

On September 18, the National Museum of Modern Art returned two pieces of looted art to the family member of a Jewish couple who died in Auschwitz concentration camp. The museum acted in compliance with a Zagreb Civil Court legal finding that the paintings were unjustly confiscated from the Reichsmann family more than 70 years ago.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-report/>.

ACTS OF VIOLENCE, CRIMINALIZATION, AND OTHER ABUSES BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY OR EXPRESSION, OR SEX CHARACTERISTICS

Criminalization: No law criminalized consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults. There were no laws criminalizing cross-dressing or other sexual or gender characteristic-related behavior.

Violence and Harassment: There were no reports of government agents, including police, who incited, perpetrated, condoned, or tolerated violence or harassment against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals. Police investigated all reports of violence by nonstate actors.

Discrimination: The laws prohibited discrimination by state and nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. The law explicitly recognized LGBTQI+ couples and their families and granted them rights equal to rights of other persons except for full parental and adoption rights. The government generally enforced those laws, but individuals and minority groups reported occasional discrimination. Transgender persons reported discrimination in the workplace.

In February the ombudsperson for gender equality reported that she received abusive emails, including death threats, after she filed a criminal complaint against former member of parliament Ivan Pernar. In February Pernar allegedly reported to authorities in Zambia that a Croatian transgender citizen under arrest there was allowed to adopt children from neighboring Congo and noted that "as far as I know, such persons cannot adopt children from the Congo." The ombudsperson asserted a former member of parliament calling for the prosecution of a Croatian national in another country, particularly one with restrictive laws against LGBTQI+ persons, put the adoptive parent at risk of imprisonment.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: The government allowed individuals to change their gender identity marker on legal and identifying documents to put them into alignment with their gender identity. Self-determination of gender was not allowed under the law; however, individuals could seek formal approval from the Ministry of Health for a gender transition after their case was

reviewed and certified. The government did not require surgical intervention or sterilization to complete the process.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: “Conversion therapies” were not explicitly forbidden by law; however, civil society groups reported there were no such publicly reported cases. Surgeries were not performed on children or nonconsenting adult intersex persons.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: There were no restrictions on freedom of expression, association, or peaceful assembly for those speaking out on LGBTQI+ matters, on media reporting on LGBTQI+ matters, on the ability of LGBTQI+ organizations to legally register or convene events, or to assemble in public or private to form associations. On June 10, Zagreb hosted its 22nd Pride Parade attended by approximately 5,000 persons. The Zagreb police reported two arrests of individuals suspected of committing “aggravated theft in connection with a hate crime” after they attempted to set fire to a pride flag on Zagreb’s main square. A small number of socially conservative, anti-gender movement members held up crucifixes in protest as parade participants passed.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The law prohibited discrimination against persons with disabilities, including in access to education, employment, health services, information, communications, public buildings, transportation, and the judicial system along with other state services, but enforcement of the law was not always effective. The law mandated access to public buildings for persons with disabilities, but building owners and managers did not always comply, and there were no reported sanctions. Children with disabilities attended all levels of school with peers without disabilities, although there were still isolated cases of discrimination. Government information and communication on disability concerns was provided in accessible formats.

The ombudsperson for persons with disabilities reported the lack of government acknowledgment of her 2022 recommendations to enhance general living standards for persons with disabilities was a barrier to helping persons with disabilities achieve their potential. Most complaints reported to the ombudsperson related to difficulties with gaining employment as a disabled person.

OTHER SOCIETAL VIOLENCE OR DISCRIMINATION

Societal discrimination against persons with HIV or AIDS was sporadic. The healthcare system did not treat HIV and AIDS as a separate illness but included it in programs for harm reduction as an illness tested along with other sexually transmitted diseases. The NGO Association for HIV (HUHIV) reported there were isolated incidents in which patient privacy had been violated. HUHIV noted the number of violations and complaints had declined in the past several years.

Section 7.

Worker Rights

A. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND THE RIGHT TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join independent unions of their choice, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination. The law required reinstatement of workers terminated for union activity.

Members of the military were not allowed to organize or to participate in a strike, while civilian employees of the military were permitted to organize but not to strike. Workers could strike only at the end of a contract or in specific circumstances cited in the contract, and only after completing mediation. Labor and management had to jointly agree on a mediator if a dispute went to mediation. If a strike was found to be illegal, participants could be dismissed, and the union held liable for damages.

The government and employers generally respected and enforced laws protecting freedom of association, the right to strike, and the right to collective bargaining. Penalties were commensurate with similar violations for analogous crimes and were regularly applied against violators.

B. PROHIBITION OF FORCED OR COMPULSORY LABOR

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

C. PROHIBITION OF CHILD LABOR AND MINIMUM AGE FOR EMPLOYMENT

The law prohibited all the worst forms of child labor, and there were no confirmed reports during the year of the worst forms of child labor. The minimum age for the employment of children was 15. Children between ages 15 and 18 who had not completed compulsory education could only work with prior approval from the government labor inspectorate and only if they would not suffer physically or mentally from the work. Children younger than 15 could work only in special circumstances and with the approval of the Croatian Social Services. The law prohibited workers younger than 18 from working overtime, at night, or in dangerous conditions, including but not limited to construction, mining, and work with electricity. The government effectively enforced the law, and criminal penalties were generally commensurate with similar serious violations. Penalties were regularly applied against violators. There were isolated violations of the law, which involved children working overtime or past curfew and occurred mainly in the hospitality, retail, construction, and services industries. Some Romani children were reportedly at risk of forced begging.

D. DISCRIMINATION (SEE SECTION 6)

E. ACCEPTABLE CONDITIONS OF WORK

Wage and Hour Laws: The law established a national minimum wage slightly above the official poverty income level, provided for a standard workweek of 40 hours, and limited overtime to 10 hours per week and 180 hours per year. The Retail Law amended during the year allowed retail stores to be open only 16 Sundays per year.

Violations of wage, hour, and overtime laws were recorded in the construction, tourism, and hospitality sectors of the economy.

Occupational Safety and Health: The law established occupational safety and health (OSH) standards that were appropriate for the main industries. Responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remained with OSH experts, not the worker. Workers could remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment.

Violations of OSH standards were most frequently reported in the construction and tourism sectors.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The Labor Inspectorate effectively enforced minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Inspection was sufficient to enforce compliance, and penalties for violations were commensurate with those for similar violations and were enforced. The Labor Inspectorate had 186 inspectors with authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions.

In 2019, the statistics bureau assessed the informal economy's size was approximately 6.5 percent of GDP but noted the data's unreliability and lack of systematic approach to assessing it. The informal sector was individualized, with persons, mostly in trades, working after hours.