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Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2024 - Croatia

FREE

83

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 34 / 40

[Civil Liberties](#) 49 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

84 / 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 Romany population 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 2023

- In June, the Paris-based international Financial Action Task Force (FATF) added Croatia to its grey list of countries under increased monitoring for money laundering and other related financial crimes, making the country the only European Union (EU) state on the list.
- The rise of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), and the proposal of a draft law that would allow editors to withhold articles without explanation and permit authorities to pressure journalists to reveal their sources, prompted increasing concerns about press freedom.

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 election in January 2020, winning 52.7 percent of the vote. Polling was peaceful, with voter turnout at 55 percent, and domestic and international stakeholders accepted the result.

The prime minister is head of government and is appointed by the president with parliamentary approval. Andrej Plenković, who chairs the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (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 2020 elections were again won by the HDZ. 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 Roman 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 has at times been headed by non-HDZ executives. SDP-backed candidates served as president from 2010 to 2015 and again since 2020.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 3 / 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. Opposition leaders continue to accuse the ruling HDZ of governing the country through shadow patrimonial networks.

Local leadership of the influential Roman Catholic Church associates with conservative and far-right civil society groups, which have become more influential in 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 other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

Eight parliamentary seats are set aside for ethnic minorities, including three for ethnic Serbs. However, the political interests of ethnic minorities and 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 and prime minister's office. However, the number of women in the parliament has decreased since 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.

Ethnic Serbs in public office face harassment, with Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) leader Milorad Pupovac notably receiving verbal attacks in recent years. SDSS 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. An informal influence network, composed primarily of the chief of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), Dragan Čović, and his business associates, is thought to be influential in Croatian politics, media, and industry.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

While some progress has been made, official corruption—including nepotism, bribery, fraud, and patronage—remains a serious problem, and the European Commission has singled out corruption as a major issue facing the country. Specialized anticorruption courts and the Bureau for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime (USKOK) operate, but local NGOs have observed that corruption has worsened since Croatia's 2013 accession into the EU.

The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) reported in February 2023 that during the previous year it had opened 23 separate corruption investigations in Croatia concerning the misappropriation of a combined €313.6 million (\$341.3 million). In May and June, multiple media investigations implicated Croatian authorities in issuing documents used to facilitate a transnational illegal adoption scheme. In December, the minister of economy and his advisor were caught attempting to sell state firms for personal profit, eventually prompting their dismissal from the government.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 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. Government bodies do not always release requested information in a timely manner.

In August 2022, authorities arrested five people over their suspected involvement in a natural-gas reselling scheme at the energy firm INA, in which the government holds a large minority stake. In 2023, investigative media continued to accuse the government, which appointed key members of INA's board, of serious oversight failures that permitted the scandal. Other allegations of serious oversight or transparency failures continued in 2023. Journalists continued to report on Russian government involvement in the energy and commodities sectors, without appropriate oversight from Croatian institutions. In September, Croatian journalists reported that Foreign Minister Goran Grlić-Radman had failed to disclose more than €2.1 million (\$2.3 million) in profits from his stake in a company that had received work from the Croatian government. In June, the Paris-based international Financial Action Task Force (FATF) added Croatia to its grey list of countries under increased monitoring for money laundering and other related financial crimes, making the country the only EU member state on the list.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to a multiyear accumulation of media investigations and other evidence that implicated government officials in transparency or oversight failures.

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. 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. Prime Minister Plenković and President Milanović have engaged in acrimonious exchanges with local and regional media. The state broadcaster, Croatian Radio Television (HRT), has been criticized for coverage that favors the government.

In July 2023, the Croatian government proposed a draft law that would allow editors to withhold articles without explanation and allow the government to pressure journalists to reveal their sources. The law was condemned by the Croatian Journalists' Association (HND), the country's primary journalists' association, and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). In July, the HND also accused the government of turning a blind eye to the growing number of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) in the

country, used in particular by politically well-connected individuals to shield themselves from critical coverage.

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.

In 2023, Jewish communities and other groups continued to express 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.

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 sensitive or political discussions without fearing surveillance or retribution.

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. Recently, accusations have emerged of the HDZ propping up faux–civil society organizations and experts to, the nonprofit

watchdog Gong said in 2022, “imitate the existence of a critical civil society... The government can count on such token organizations to not address anything politically problematic.”

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 are concerns about the influence of extreme right-wing groups on the judiciary. Judges have 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, for example. In July 2023, the European Commission, in its Rule of Law Report, noted opportunities for better transparency, a low level of public trust in the judiciary, and “excessive length of investigation, prosecution, and adjudication” of corruption cases, which undermined the efficacy of the anticorruption system.

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 those 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.

Prison conditions do not meet international standards due to overcrowding and inadequate medical care.

Rights groups continue to report violent pushbacks by Croatian police of migrants and refugees at the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

F4 0-4 pts

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

Members of ethnic and religious minority groups and LGBT+ people in Croatia face 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.

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

Police have engaged in violence against migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers attempting irregular border crossings into Croatia. While violent pushbacks at the border have occurred with less frequency as numbers of migrants have ebbed, they are still reported.

In an August 2023 report, the United Nations observed that Roma and Serbs in Croatia faced "structural discrimination" and that the government had undertaken few concrete efforts to combat widespread social stigma against both groups. On several occasions in 2023, Milanović has used derogatory language about the Bosniak community and questioned historical facts of the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

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

Freedom of movement is protected by the constitution and upheld in practice. 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 without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 3 / 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 of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 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 2022, a higher court affirmed the right to adoption for same-sex couples.

Domestic violence remains a concern. Convictions for rape and domestic violence can bring lengthy prison terms, although Amnesty International has 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. Amnesty International has 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 after 10 weeks into a pregnancy. Croatian doctors face pressure from hospital leaders, religious figures, and others to refrain from performing the procedure. A 2023 article from Balkan Insight describing limited access to abortion in Croatia stated that 59 percent of gynecologists in the country, for various reasons, refuse to perform abortions under any circumstance. It added that laws requiring that they make referrals to doctors who can perform the procedure are not always adhered to.

G4 0-4 pts

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