



ECF Rule of Law Contribution 2025

Croatia

By Human Rights House Zagreb

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Key civic space trends

- Civil society organisations (CSOs) working on certain topics, such as human rights, the rule of law, democracy, LGBTIQ+ rights, and anti-corruption are especially targeted and lack funding.
- The dysfunction and bypassing of the government's Council for Civil Society Development continues.
- Key civil society strategy is still missing, as in the previous nine years.

Summary

Civic space is rated as narrowed in Croatia, according to the CIVICUS Monitor.¹ The European Commission's 2024 Rule of Law report pointed out that Croatia needed to address the issue of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) targeting journalists and civil society. However, SLAPPs and legal harassment remained a problem in 2024. There were no efforts to engage with civil society and other relevant stakeholders in discussion of the implementation of the Commission's findings and recommendations, besides occasional participation in the few discussions organised by civil society. Over the previous nine years, Croatia has been without a civil society strategy.

Croatia's response to rule of law, human rights, and democracy challenges remains weak, mainly due to the lack of adequate civil dialogue and a low level of mutual trust between the state and civil society. The gaps in sustainable, long-term funding for civil society and the administrative burdens placed on the sector continue to narrow civic space in the country.

Institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape

2024 was a very turbulent year politically in Croatia, with three elections being held. The parliamentary elections had the biggest impact on the work of civil society organisations, civic space, and the broader human rights landscape in Croatia. The election result saw a rise in the number of far-right members of the parliament, who joined the new governing coalition, excluding Serbian minority MPs who previously supported the government. The immediate effect was the dissolution of the office of the deputy prime minister in charge of social affairs and human rights.² The post was previously held by a member of the Serbian national minority party, which now sits outside the governing coalition. This meant that Croatia lost the momentum built up over the last two years in pushing some of the key human rights and civic space initiatives.

¹ <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/croatia/>

² https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2024_05_57_994.html



As of February 2025, there has not been a single session of the Government Council for Human Rights, which was chaired by the former deputy prime minister, since the dissolution of the office in May 2024. This multisectoral body, composed of representatives from crucial government departments and CSOs, was instrumental in fostering dialogue between the state and civil society. The Government Council for Human Rights pushed for solutions to some of the long-standing structural issues, such as the adoption of the national human rights policy³ and the national gender equality policy,⁴ which have been absent since the illiberal backsliding in 2016. The implementation of these policies has been halted as the action plans for 2024 and 2025 have not been adopted by the government.

There have been no improvements in the functioning of the infrastructure for civil society in Croatia. Since this area was also under the supervision of the deputy prime minister, in 2024 the number of sessions of the Government Council for Civil Society Development was reduced, as the council had been dysfunctional and irrelevant for several years. For the last nine years, the country has lacked a fundamental civil society strategy, which has been in development since 2021. There is no clarity on when it will be finalised and adopted.

The regulatory environment for civic freedoms

During the 2024 presidential election campaign, the prime minister questioned the future funding of the CSO Gong, in response to their work on election ethics and integrity. This was perceived as a potential political overreach into the independent disbursement of public funds carried out by national institutions. Such a narrative coming from high political offices has a negative influence on the work and perception of civil society in Croatia, which is concerned with protecting and promoting the rule of law and liberal democracy.⁵ With the 2025 local and regional elections approaching in May, there is a concern that CSOs working on human rights, the rule of law, and democracy will be targeted by slander and negative portrayals similar to experience, as happened in the last elections in 2021.⁶

In 2024, the most significant negative impact on the freedom of peaceful assembly remained the continued securitisation of Saint Mark's Square in Zagreb, which has been ongoing since 2020 after a shooting directed at a government building. The square is surrounded by metal fences which block peoples' free and unhindered access to the square, including, most importantly, for the purposes of assembly. This is the most politically relevant location where people can be heard and

³ <https://pravamanjina.gov.hr/UserDocImages/dokumenti/National%20Plan%20for%20the%20Protection%20and%20Promotion%20of%20Human%20Rights%20and%20Combating%20Discrimination%20for%20the%20period%20to%202027.pdf>

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<https://ravnopravnost.gov.hr/UserDocImages/dokumenti/NPRS%202027%20APRS%202024/Nacionalni%20plan%20za%20ravnopravnost%20spolova,%20za%20razdoblje%20do%202027..pdf>

⁵ <https://gong.hr/2024/12/19/gong-porucuje-li-premijer-da-je-sklon-kazniti-organizacije-koje-inzistiraju-na-provedbi-slobodnih-i-postenih-izbora/>

⁶ See para 46 at https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/KLJP_GI2021-EN_Online.pdf

seen by elected democratic representatives and officials, as the square is where the main institutions are located, including the government, parliament, and Constitutional Court. Therefore, this securitisation severely affect peoples' right to public expression and protest.

SLAPPs remain a significant problem in Croatia, primarily affecting journalists and negatively impacting their work, media freedom, and the freedom of expression. In addition to journalists, civil society groups and activists are also targeted. According to the most recent report⁷ by Friends of the Earth Croatia documenting pressures on environmental groups and activists, SLAPPs and investigations have become typical repressive measures over the past decade in Croatia, used to criminalise environmental rights defenders, silence critical voices, and financially burden environmental organisations and initiatives. These measures are common in cases where organisations and initiatives successfully challenge the legality of certain environmental interventions. The report argues that the targeting of specific organisations and initiatives is closely related to broader issues of corruption.⁸

In addition to environmental actors, activists from the Youth Initiative for Human Rights have been targeted, threatened, and subjected to public smear campaigns and slander because of their activities which aimed to criticise the glorification of convicted war criminals and the need to remove glorifying decorations from the main square.⁹

Funding for civil society

Resources and funding for the work of civil society remained inadequate in 2024. A recent report on access to funding for human rights organisations in Croatia by Human Rights House Zagreb¹⁰ indicates four issues that should be addressed in the civil society funding landscape. Firstly, access to funding for advocacy and research activities and activities that enable work on public policies is very limited. Despite often being recognised as relevant stakeholders by key decision-makers, who actively seek their participation, organisations are often unable to participate effectively due to the lack of funding for this type of work. CSOs point out the lack of tenders at the national level, which could cover their advocacy work, including the promotion and protection of human rights and in particular the rights of marginalised groups and individuals.

Secondly, civil society's access to funding from national and local public sources is insufficient. CSOs highlight the need for more transparent and efficient long-term financing of advocacy activities at the national and local levels. This would involve evaluating the quality of the implemented activities instead of only relying on quantitative indicators, as well as increasing the number of funds for financing projects and programmes. Another problem is the lack of national and local tenders for co-financing. Civil society emphasises the importance of ensuring that the entire co-financing amount for contracted projects from national or local sources is received.

⁷ https://zelena-akcija.hr/system/document/1355/doc_files/original/ZA_AnalizaFIN-3.pdf

⁸ https://zelena-akcija.hr/system/document/1355/doc_files/original/ZA_AnalizaFIN-3.pdf

⁹ <https://www.yihr.hr/hr/iza-postavljanja-kuglica-na-trg-bana-josipa-jelacica-stoji-yihr>

¹⁰ https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/KLJP_PristupFinanciranju-ENG.pdf

Thirdly, CSOs working on the protection and promotion of human rights in Croatia continuously warn that national and local public funding is not adequately allocated for activities addressing certain pressing social challenges and issues. CSOs that are continuously underfunded include those working on anti-corruption, sexual and reproductive rights, civic education, gender equality, health rights, anti-discrimination, LGBTIQ+ rights, and human rights and democracy in the digital environment.

Lastly, although Croatian civil society recognises some positive developments, such as increasing funding lump sums, the administrative burdens to access funding are still a key issue hindering their work. This is seen by some organisations as reflecting a clear lack of trust in CSOs and their work. CSOs also highlight the institutions' neglect of civil society's role in the democratic process. To justify their role, relevance, and beneficial work, CSOs must continuously meet excessive administrative requirements that go beyond standard practices and legally prescribed obligations. Some organisations also point to administrative burden as a method of weakening the influence of their work.¹¹

Civil dialogue and the right to participation

The issues regarding public participation in Croatia in 2023 remained unresolved in 2024. E-consultations were still the dominant form of participation, despite being perceived as a tool to fulfil formal obligations rather than a genuine dialogue exercise. Public consultations on draft laws and public policies were often carried out as a formality, rather than in a substantive manner, weakening opportunities for participation and having a negative impact on the quality of public policies. The main problem with the consultation processes was that they were not organised at the inception of the public policies but rather at the end of the process, when a draft law or strategy was already developed. The issues with appointing CSOs to working and advisory bodies remained the same: the lack of transparency and merit-based selection. In addition, the Council for Civil Society Development was still not performing its role as the main body for cooperation and dialogue.¹²

Despite the high level of participation from CSOs in working groups preparing for 2024–2025 action plan for the implementation of the National Human Rights and Anti-discrimination Plan, the documents published for e-consultation deviated from the proposal that was adopted by consensus by the working group. The main changes were the omission of the description of activities and quantitative indicators. This was an essential part of the action plan, to ensure clarity and monitoring the implementation of the measures. Although the e-consultation concluded at the end of 2024, at the time of writing the government has not adopted the new action plan.¹³

¹¹ https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/KLJP_PristupFinanciranju-ENG.pdf

¹² <https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Regional-Report-on-Human-Rights-Defenders-Regional-Network-of-Human-Rights-Houses-1.pdf>

¹³ <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/ECon/EconReport?entityId=28753>

Civil society Resilience

Following the 2024 Rule of Law Report, a series of public discussions with civil society, decision-makers and other institutional stakeholders (for the judiciary, media, law-enforcement in the area of anti-corruption, cooperation with CSOs, and human rights, were held to discuss the findings. These gatherings on the judiciary,¹⁴ media,¹⁵ anti-corruption¹⁶ and civil society¹⁷) provided an opportunity to have a dialogue on problems and possible solutions between civil society, policy makers, independent institutions, and academia.

Recommendations

Targeted recommendation:

In an inclusive, genuine, and constructive process, develop and adopt without delay a new National Plan for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development until 2027, that will systematically tackle the issues faced by civil society, such a financing framework, access to and participation in decision-making processes, and an institutional framework for civil society. This should be concluded by the end of 2025.

- Refrain from attacking and threatening GONG's funding.
- Adopt and implement concrete legislative measures against SLAPPs targeting civil society, journalists and other actors, in line with the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive.
- Initiate the process of creating a new framework for civil society participation in decision-making and provide adequate long-term legal protection of the right to participate in public affairs.
- Resume the work of the Council on Human Rights.
- Reset the work of the Council on Civil Society Development to work in line with its mission and purpose by 2025.

¹⁴ <https://tripalo.hr/skup-stanje-u-hrvatskom-pravosu-u-izvjestaj-o-vladavini-prava-kako-dalje/>

¹⁵ <https://tripalo.hr/poziv-na-skup-slapp-i-medijske-slobode-izvjestaj-o-vladavini-prava/>

¹⁶ <https://tripalo.hr/skup-buducnost-borbe-protiv-korupcije-u-rh-izvjestaj-o-vladavini-prava/>

¹⁷ <https://tripalo.hr/skup-izvjestaj-o-vladavini-prava-civilno-drustvo-i-sudjelovanje-u-procesima-donosnja-odluka/>

About the author

Human Rights House Zagreb (HRH) is a human rights organisation established in 2008 as a network of civil society organisations, with the goal of protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms. HRH's vision is to build a democratic, pluralistic, and inclusive society founded upon the values of human rights protection, the rule of law, social justice, and solidarity. Through research, monitoring, advocacy, and education, HRH contributes to the protection, promotion, development, and advancement of human rights and fundamental freedoms. By publishing annual overviews of the state of human rights, thematic reports, and policy briefs, they help create better laws and public policies.