



Freedom in the World 2020

Croatia

85
/100

FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	36 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	49 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS
85 /100 **Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



TOP

Overview

Croatia is a parliamentary republic that regularly holds free elections. Civil and political rights are generally respected, though corruption in the public sector is a serious issue. The Roma and ethnic Serbs face discrimination, as do LGBT+ people. In recent years, concerns about the presence of far-right groups and figures espousing discriminatory values in public life have increased.

Key Developments in 2019

- In the May European Parliamentary elections, the center-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SDP) both lost seats to various populist right- and left-wing parties.
- In July, serious allegations of abuse carried out by Croatia's border police against migrants and refugees along the Bosnian border emerged, including allegations of torture.
- In the first round of the country's presidential elections in December, former prime minister Zoran Milanović claimed the most votes, while sitting president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, finished second, and far-right populist Miroslav Škoro finished third. The second round of voting was set to occur in January 2020.

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

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The president, who is head of state, is elected by popular vote for a maximum of two five-year terms. The prime minister is head of government and is appointed by the president with parliamentary approval.

HDZ chairman Andrej Plenković became prime minister following the 2016 legislative elections, in which HDZ won a plurality of seats.

The first round of voting for the presidential election occurred in December 2019. Former prime minister Zoran Milanović of the SDP claimed the most votes, incumbent Grabar-Kitarović of the HDZ finished second, and far-right populist Miroslav Škoro finished third. The second round of voting was set to occur in January 2020.

A2 0-4 pts

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

4 / 4

Members of the 151-member unicameral parliament, called the Hrvatski Sabor, are elected to four-year terms.

Snap parliamentary elections in 2016—which were the second legislative polls in less than a year, held after the previous prime minister lost a no-confidence vote—were considered free and fair but marked by low turnout. The HDZ and its allies won 61 seats, and the party has since led a coalition government, the composition of which has changed occasionally.

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 some concerns about the use of public funds for political campaigns persist, in general, the State Election Commission implements robust electoral laws effectively.

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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. Small far-left and far-right parties made gains in the 2017 local elections.

The composition of the government changed in 2017. The reformist Bridge of Independent Lists party withdrew from the HDZ-led coalition, refusing to back Finance Minister Zdravko Marić, who had been implicated in a corruption controversy related to his time working at the company Agrokor. The HDZ then allied with the left-wing Croatian People's Party (HNS), which had been part of the SDP-led opposition coalition.

The HNS's 2017 decision to join the HDZ's government prompted the party's own fragmentation. Anka Mrak-Taritaš, who had been an HNS candidate for the 2017 municipal elections, formed her own party—the Civic Liberal Alliance (GLAS)—with three other HNS lawmakers.

The May 2019 European Parliament elections saw the emergence and election of a slate of new right- and left-wing populist parties and candidates, all of whom made significant headway against the mainline HDZ and SDP.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

4 / 4**TOP**

The SDP-led opposition coalition holds a significant bloc of seats in the legislature and is generally able to operate free from restrictions or intimidation. In general, 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 main SDP-led opposition bloc has won the most seats in only two parliamentary elections since 1991, although the country was headed by an SDP president from 2010 to 2015, and a non-HDZ and non-SDP executive from 2000 to 2010.

B3 0-4 pts

<p>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?</p>	<p>3 / 4</p>
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While voters and candidates are generally able to freely express their political choices, many public servants obtained their positions through patronage networks, and thus risk becoming beholden to a party or special interest group as a result. Patronage networks are particularly influential in Zagreb, which has been under the stewardship of HDZ-affiliated Mayor Milan Bandić—considered one of the country’s most powerful politicians—almost continuously for the past 20 years. Bandić’s tenure has been marked by corruption allegations, including conflict-of-interest cases and credible allegations of improper hiring practices and public procurement deals.

The Catholic Church remains influential in Croatia and has begun associating with conservative and far-right civil society groups, which have become a bigger factor in local politics in recent years.

B4 0-4 pts

<p>Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?</p>	<p>3 / 4</p>
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Eight parliamentary seats are set aside for ethnic minorities, including three for ethnic Serbs. However, the political interests of marginalized groups, notably Roma and Serbs, are underrepresented.

Women are represented across political parties, and a woman held Croatia's presidency through 2019 (the first of two rounds of the presidential election was held in December 2019). However, the number of women in parliament decreased in 2016 after the Constitutional Court struck down a law requiring 40 percent of a party's candidates be women. A 2016 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) election monitoring mission called for political parties to run more women as candidates, and to promote more women to senior leadership positions.

The treatment of ethnic Serbs in public office in Croatia has deteriorated in recent years. In September 2018, sitting lawmaker and Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDS) leader Milorad Pupovac was pelted with food items by a protester in Zagreb. Pupovac claimed the incident reflected growing hostility toward the Serb population from ascendant right-wing and nationalist movements in the country, many of which appear to enjoy the tacit support of the HDZ. Pupovac remained the target verbal attacks throughout 2019, and his party's election posters were repeatedly defaced during the European Parliament 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. ^{TOP}

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	3 / 4
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A criminal code in effect since 2013 enforces stiffer penalties for various forms of corruption. While some progress has been made, official corruption—including nepotism, bribery, fraud, and patronage—remains a serious problem. Numerous high-level corruption cases, like the one involving the government’s mismanagement and collapse of Croatia’s largest employer, Agrokor, have been filed in recent years, but many have yet to see a verdict. International bodies including the European Commission have called for greater efforts to eliminate malfeasance in public procurement processes.

In October 2018, Zagreb’s Mayor Milan Bandić was acquitted of corruption charges alleging that he had improperly manipulated city financing by allowing a church-affiliated group to collect campaign signatures without paying appropriate fees. Separately, the same month, Bandić and a number of associates were tried on charges including abuse of power, influence peddling, tax evasion, and customs fraud. The case was still in the courts at the end of 2019.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	3 / 4
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In 2013, Croatia adopted the Law on the Right of Access to Information. The legislation includes a proportionality and public-interest test designed to determine a balance between reasons for disclosing information and reasons for restricting it; and it establishes an independent information commission to monitor compliance. However, government bodies do not always release requested information in a timely manner.

Media reports in 2018 suggested that Economy Minister Martina Dalić and a group of well-connected businesspeople and lawyers crafted a 2017 law allowing the government to take over management of the troubled agricultural company, Agrokor. The entire drafting process took place outside of official proceedings and in private meetings. Facing conflict-of-interest allegations, Dalić resigned in May 2018.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	3 / 4
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Media in Croatia is highly polarized, but generally free from overt political interference or manipulation. However, journalists continue to face threats, harassment, and occasional attacks, which has created an atmosphere of self-censorship. In June 2018, reporter Hrvoje Bajlo was attacked and severely beaten in the city of Zadar. Bajlo said his attacker threatened him with further harm if he did not stop reporting on two individuals in government who had been charged with embezzling from state-run companies. The Croatian Journalists Association characterized the attack on Bajlo as a consequence of authorities' failure to condemn earlier threats toward, attacks on, and harassment of journalists.

Several incidents of police intimidation and harassment against journalists occurred in 2019. The most striking was the arrest (and eventual release) of Gordan Duhacek in September over two tweets he had written, one of which was critical of the Croatian police. The general secretary of the European Federation of Journalists, as well as local journalist associations, have

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warned of growing political pressure and attacks on the free press in the country under the HDZ government.

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, and this is generally upheld in practice. However, the small Serb Orthodox community remains vulnerable to harassment, and members have reported vandalism of their churches. Jewish communities and other groups have expressed increasing concern about Holocaust denial and displays by right-wing nationalists of symbols and slogans associated with the fascist Ustaša regime that governed Croatia during the Second World War. Revisionist accounts of the Ustaša period continued to be promoted by far-right groups and newspapers throughout 2019.

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 schools and universities, 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 Parliament in July 2018, the HDZ has long sought to delay the updates, and has moved to install its own members into the group tasked with developing its policies—including extremely conservative members opposed to sex education.

Also in July 2018, a far-right movement sought to fire three academics at the University of Zagreb for a paper they had published on the surging far-right in the country. While the authors of the paper were not fired, the allegations

TOP

prompted an initial investigation by the university, reflecting the increasing presence and influence of far-right groups.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

4 / 4

People are generally free to engage in discussions of a sensitive nature without fearing surveillance or retribution, although there have been some reports of police arresting individuals voicing criticism of the government.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is protected and respected in Croatia.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

4 / 4

NGOs in Croatia are robust, active, and free from restrictions. However, many groups have complained of growing political pressure from parts of the government and the HDZ against journalists and civil society activists. **TOP**

In September 2019, Prime Minister Plenković verbally attacked a local NGO which had shed light on the allegedly illicit financial dealings of Croatia's

candidate for the “Democracy and Demography” portfolio of the European Commission.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

4 / 4

The constitution allows workers to form and join trade unions, and this right is generally respected in practice.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

3 / 4

While judicial independence is generally respected, there have been recent concerns about the influence of extreme right-wing groups on the judiciary. For example, in 2017, a court reversed a 1945 conviction of an academic who was complicit in atrocities committed by the fascist Ustaša regime. Critics allege the courts have been ruling in line with the views of right-wing NGOs and the HDZ, while the courts maintain that they are redressing partisan rulings of the Yugoslav communist era.

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 **TOP** more efficiently for individuals with abundant resources or high social standing.

In November 2018, Ivica Todorović, the former owner of Agrokor under investigation for fraud in relation to the company’s collapse, was extradited

from the United Kingdom. He was arrested upon arrival in Croatia but released days later after posting the €1 million bail. Todorović was not indicted by the end of 2019.

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.

F4 0-4 pts

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

2 / 4

Ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT+ people in Croatia face discrimination. Analysts have expressed concerns that the increasing visibility of far-right, nationalist groups has spread discriminatory rhetoric. 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. A group of NGOs in December 2018 criticized the government for lacking a comprehensive human rights policy, and warned of the continuing deterioration of protection of human rights in the country, especially for marginalized groups and women. **TOP**

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

Reports of police violence against migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers continued in 2019. Most of such incidents took place along the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, rather than Serbia, as in the past. Reports emerged in July that border police had allegedly committed serious abuse and torture of migrants and refugees.

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, but not the right to adopt children.

Domestic violence remains a concern. Convictions for rape and domestic violence can bring lengthy prison terms, although Amnesty International noted that the vast majority of cases receive light sentences of one year or less. Police sometimes fail to adhere to recommended procedures for handling reports of domestic violence.

In April 2018, lawmakers ratified the Istanbul Convention, a treaty on preventing and combating gender-based and domestic violence. The treaty was unpopular among conservative and far-right groups who believed its tenets could lead to the legal introduction of same-sex marriage, a third gender category, or school curriculum changes. In response, the government adopted a statement saying the treaty's adoption would not change the legal definition of marriage. Amnesty International criticized that, although the treaty had been signed, the Croatian government had not fully harmonized its legislative and policy framework with the treaty's terms.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	3 / 4
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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 the appropriate consideration in court cases.

TOP



On Croatia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

85 / 100 Free

Other Years

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