

Croatia 2025

Information from: Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia

Independence, effectiveness and establishment of NHRIs

International accreditation status and SCA recommendations

The Ombudsman of the Republic of Croatia (ORC) was last [re-accredited with A-status in March 2019](#). Among the recommendations, the SCA encouraged the Croatian NHRI to advocate for broad consultation and participation of civil society in the selection process for the position of the Ombudsperson.

The SCA also noted that the Croatian NHRI had recently been mandated with additional responsibilities under the whistle-blower legislation, but that no new funding had been allocated to allow it to carry out these new responsibilities. Therefore, the SCA encouraged the Croatian NHRI to continue to advocate for the funding necessary to ensure that it can effectively carry out the full extent of its mandate, including its newly-mandated responsibilities.

Additionally, the SCA noted that the term of office of the Ombudsperson is of 8 years and that the enabling law does not limit the number of reappointments. The SCA took the view that it would be preferable for this to be limited to one reappointment.

Finally, the SCA acknowledged that the regional offices in Rijeka were not accessible to persons with disabilities at the time. It encouraged the NHRI to continue to seek a solution of this situation, including by advocating for additional funds to ensure that all its offices are accessible.

The SCA will consider the reaccreditation of the Croatian NHRI in its second session in October 2025.

Follow-up to international and European actors' recommendations on NHRIs and relevant developments

Since its last re-accreditation in 2019, the institution has taken a number of concrete steps to address SCA's recommendations issued to it. These have been elaborated in detail in ORC's inputs to [ENNHRI's 2023](#) and [2022 Rule of Law Report](#) as well as in the 2024 Annual report of the Ombudswoman to the

Croatian Parliament.

In addition to these, [an additional Deputy was elected in July 2024](#). This is especially important taking into account the increase in the number of ORC's mandates and the related tasks over the years, as well as the rise in the number of complaints and, more generally, demands and expectations from the public, CSOs, and the media who have come to rely on it as an expert independent institution in relation to numerous human rights issues, necessitating the strengthening of the institutional capacities also at the managing levels.

Furthermore, for reasons of increased workload in the entire institution, but also with a view of fulfilling the recommendations by the UN's Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture (SPT) [communicated to the state and the Ombudswoman at the end of 2024](#) following its 2023 visit to Croatia on the strengthening of the capacities of Croatia's National Preventive Mechanism, which in the Republic of Croatia is a mandate carried out by the institution of the Ombudswoman, the ORC has requested and received the funds for three (3) more staff members in the 2025 state budget, which was approved.

In addition to this and in the future, the increase in the institutional capacities in terms of staff will also be necessary in order to meet the recommendations issued to the Republic of Croatia by the OECD with regard to the strengthening of the ORC's whistle-blowers protection related mandate (OECD Working Group on Bribery's [Report](#) adopted in December 2024 issued a recommendation "to ensure that the ombudsperson has sufficient resources for its whistleblowing function). Also, there are [new tasks related to the implementation of the EU Artificial Intelligence Act](#). Namely, most recently, the ORC was named as one of the national public authorities authorized to supervise or enforce the respect of obligations under EU law protecting fundamental rights, including the right to non-discrimination, in relation to certain high-risk uses of AI systems in line with the EU AI Act).

Since the earthquake in 2020 that rendered the ORC's offices unusable, the institution has been using temporary offices, which are now quite limiting in terms of the institution's needs. Taking the current situation into account, and especially in line with the recommendations of the international mechanisms and new mandates which are to be accommodated in terms of the strengthening of the human capacities of the institution, new, more fitting working space would be needed to enable optimal working processes.

Follow-up on NHRI recommendations

When it comes to the recommendation stemming from the [2024 EU Rule of Law Report](#), namely for the Republic of Croatia to further improve the follow-up to recommendations and ensure a more systematic response to information requests of the Ombudsperson, the ORC would like to highlight the following

points.

Firstly, the Government Office for Human Rights and the Rights of National Minorities (GOHRRNM) has continued with its annual tracking of the implementation of the ORC's recommendations, which, after a long pause, it had resumed in 2023. Namely, the Government Office prepares the Report that should inform on the implementation of the recommendations of the ORC (which is being done only and exclusively for ORC's recommendations). The first year of its application experienced certain deficiencies – namely, it only included a summary of numerical self-assessment of the responsible bodies on the level of implementation without any explanation. Hence, the explanations of the competent authorities were not visible, so it is not clear what they considered an implemented recommendation.

Consequently, and based on the recommendation from the Commission's Rule of Law Report, the methodology was revised in the dialogue between the GOHRRNM and the ORC. As a result, the GOHRRNM has provided the ORC in March 2025 with a [draft Report on the implementation](#) of the Ombudswoman's recommendations, which includes statistical data on implementation, but more importantly, explanations of relevant bodies on what they have done/are planning to do.

At the same, substantively, based on our work (casework, information gathered in the preparation of the drafting of the 2024 annual report), we can see progress in certain areas (e.g. a significant number of ORC's recommendations were taken up in the processes of the drafting of the legislation regulating housing); whereas certain others are stalling (thus, for instance, the ORC has encountered difficulties acquiring the information in the area of health care, which, at the same time, is the area with the highest number of complaints).

Timely discussion of the Annual Report

The trend of stalling with the discussions on the ORC's reports in the plenary session of the Croatian Parliament has continued; thus, neither the institution's [2023 annual report](#), nor the [2022 annual report](#) (despite the opinion issued by the Government of the Republic of Croatia) and the [Special Report on the Impact of COVID-19 on Human Rights and Equality](#) have been discussed in the plenary session of the Parliament as yet.

Additionally, at the time of this reporting, the Government of the Republic of Croatia has still not issued its opinion on the ORC's 2023 Annual Report, which is a prerequisite for the plenary parliamentary debate on it.

The ORC has continually flagged this issue in the Parliament (e.g. during the discussions on draft legislation) and through media. [As the Ombudswoman has stressed previously](#), timely discussion of the institution's reports is crucial for the debate to be relevant and for the ORC to be able to receive timely

feedback from the Parliament on them and be able to utilize it in her work.

Limited salary reform in the state and public administration concerning Ombudswoman's advisors

Despite the initial announcements during the preparation of the salary reform in the state and public administration, according to which the salaries of the Ombudswoman's advisors were to be increased only cosmetically (instead of the existing coefficient of 2.425, it was to be rounded to 2.5), the final proposal for the regulation on coefficients increased it to 2.70. However, we believe that this increase should have been higher.

Access to information by the NHRI

Since 2018, the ORC had faced barriers when it comes to its NPM officers accessing the data related to irregular migration stored in the Ministry of Interior's (MoI) information system and had, thus, in her annual reports repeatedly [issued recommendations to the MoI](#). The EC had been flagging the issue since the inception of its rule of law reporting, issuing recommendations to the Republic of Croatia.

In 2024, an improvement in this area was recorded. During the NPM visit to the Registration Centre for Applicants for International Protection, we were not granted access to relevant data. The first reason was that there were no police officers authorized to provide such data present during the visit, which is why we received the information via telephone. The second reason was that the Centre, which had been established only a few months before the NPM visit, according to information provided to us, did not maintain relevant records. During the NPM visit to the border police station conducted later in the year, we were granted access to all requested data, both those kept in physical form and those maintained in electronic form (Information System of the Ministry of Interior).

Regulatory framework

The national regulatory framework applicable to the ORC has not changed since January 2024. However, the Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act) was adopted in June 2024. Article 77(2) thereof requires Member States to designate and publish the list of public authorities or bodies competent for the supervision and enforcement of obligations relating to the protection of fundamental rights when using high-risk AI systems. In line with this obligation. [In December 2024 the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration](#)

[and Digital Transformation notified the European Commission of the competent authorities in accordance with the Act, which, among several other institution, include the institution of the Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia,](#) following the meeting with ORC.

The Law on the Implementation of the AIA is planned for adoption by the Government of the Republic of Croatia in the first quarter of 2025. The Ombudswoman received an invitation to participate in the working group that will work on the development of the implementing legislative framework, however, at the time of writing this report, no meetings of the aforementioned working group was held. In the meantime, the working group was set up (the ORC is a member) and the first meeting took place in April 2025.

As regards the mandate to contribute to the access of justice for individuals, there have been no normative changes in the period of 2022-2024. However, certain progress in terms of the resources available and in terms of ORC's own activities contributed to the strengthening of the mandate.

Complaints handling

When it comes to complaints, the ORC worked on a total of 6,404 cases in 2024 . Of the total number of cases, 4,942 were opened in 2024 (so-called newly opened cases), which is 2.81 % more than the previous year, while 1,462 were transferred from previous years. Among the newly opened cases, the majority were opened upon citizen complaints or on our own initiative (3,716), there were 1,011 general initiatives, and 215 cases were opened for office operations.

As in the last five years, in 2024, the most cases were opened in relation to discrimination (420), the right to health (394) and labour rights (327).

Ombudswoman's request to the Constitutional Court to abolish a provision in the amended Law on Mandatory Health Insurance and further intervention in court proceedings

In 2023, the Ombudswoman submitted a [request to the Constitutional Court](#) proposing to the Court to abolish one of the provisions of the amended [Law on Mandatory Health Insurance](#). With this provision newly introduced in 2023, the obligation is introduced for a certain category of insured citizens (the ones that are unemployed but are not officially registered as such at the Croatian Employment Service) to periodically personally approach the Croatian Health Insurance Fund (CHIF) or otherwise they will lose their health insurance covered by the State Budget. The Ombudswoman finds this obligation discriminatory on the grounds of disability and health status since not all persons will be able to personally approach CHIF and on the ground of property status, since not all persons will be able to cover the transport costs to the locations of the CHIF. Besides this, the Ombudswoman warned that introducing

this obligation will have a more negative and severe impact on those groups that are generally deprived of information and live segregated, as the Roma do. [The Constitutional Court's decision on the request is still pending.](#)

The institution also joined anti-discrimination court proceedings on the plaintiff's side as an intervener in a case of suspected discrimination in employment. The case, initiated in 2023, was still ongoing in 2024 (in the final judgment, the court did not find discrimination in this instance).

Awareness-raising activities as part of the projects implemented by the ORC

Furthermore, during the reporting period, the ORC participated in several projects with various partners. The activities contributed or will contribute to the implementation of the mandate. In the period July 2022-February 2024, the ORC was one of the seven NHRIs participating in the FRA/ENNHRI project "Support to National Human Rights Institutions in the Monitoring of Human Rights and the Rule of Law" and its national activities included both training for the ORC's staff as well as educational activities provided by it to civil servants and NGOs.

Two EU-funded projects are currently being implemented with civil society partners. As part of the first, focused on combating racism and discrimination, the ORC organized a conference on the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the Antidiscrimination Act in Croatia (ADA), gathering relevant stakeholders in a discussion on the progress achieved and the way forward, [published a handbook on the application of the ADA](#), and is planning to provide training sessions on combatting discrimination to faculty students set to enter the teaching profession. Furthermore, research relating to discrimination based on race/ethnicity in housing is being conducted.

As part of the second project aimed at developing the skills of civil society actors, civil servants and lawyers for the implementation of EU law, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and for engaging in strategic litigation, the ORC is collecting data on discrimination in relation to social housing and will hold workshops on litigation strategies and collecting evidence in discrimination cases.

Ongoing strengthening of the framework

In relation to NHRI regulatory framework, as the ORC is a multi-mandated body and one of its mandates is that of the central equality body. On 7 May 2024, the Council of the European Union adopted two new Directives, which establish a set of minimum standards for Equality Bodies (Directive 2024/1500 and Directive 2024/1499). Together, they require States to take specific and concrete measures to guarantee the independence of Equality Bodies and ensure their effectiveness in combatting discrimination and promoting equality.

Currently, there is an ongoing review of whether, due to the obligation to transpose these Directives, some legislative changes are needed and of which laws (as there are also other equality bodies and several pieces of legislation that could potentially be changed). In her 2024 Annual Report the ORC recommended that transposition of these Directives should be done in cooperation with equality bodies.

NHRI enabling and safe space

The relevant state authorities generally have a good awareness of the NHRI's mandate, independence and role. The ORC is regularly present in the media, at various events and regularly participates in the relevant sessions of the parliamentary committees, thus, raising the institution's visibility and raising the awareness of its work. The ORC maintains regular dialogue with all of the relevant authorities in various forms, such as meetings, participation in the public consultations, inviting their representatives to participate in the events it organizes, debates and round tables organized in the Parliament, etc. and continues to emphasise the importance of cooperation and of the responsiveness to its work and recommendations.

Access to information and to policy makers

The ORC has adequate access to information with regard to legislative and policy initiatives and procedures. It has access to the various stages of the legislation and policy-making processes. In [line with the law](#), it can indicate the need for the adoption and amendments of acts and other regulations to the Croatian Parliament as well as the need for the harmonization of laws and bylaws with the international standards and the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia.

In practice, the representatives of the institution, on certain occasions and on its own free choosing, also take part in the working groups set up to draft legislation (particularly when the changes relate to ORC's recommendations). ORC regularly and frequently participates in public consultations in the processes of adopting policy documents and legislation (in 2024 it took part in 49 public consultations). Furthermore, ORC participates in the discussions in the parliamentary committees when these pieces of legislations are being discussed and can do so in all parliamentary committees and without invitation. The ORC has also organized events with the aim of bringing together the relevant stakeholders and facilitate further discussion on particular legislative proposals.

Access to resources to carry out the mandate

Since 2022, the institution has been strengthened when it comes to staff and the managing structure. However, further strengthening of the human

resources will be necessary to accommodate among other needs, the SPT's recommendations to the Republic of Croatia regarding the strengthening of the NPM mandate (funds already received, staff yet to be employed), OECD's recommendations regarding further strengthening of the whistleblower protection mandate and the requirements brought about by being designated as one of the public authorities competent for the supervision and enforcement of obligations relating to the protection of fundamental rights when using high-risk AI systems in line with the EU's AI Act (Article 77/2 AI Act body).

As mentioned earlier, since the earthquake in 2020 that rendered the ORC's offices unusable, the institution has been using temporary offices, which are now limiting in terms of the institution's needs. Taking the current situation into account, and especially should the recommendations of the international mechanisms and new mandates be accommodated in terms of the strengthening of the human capacities of the institution, new, more fitting working space would be needed to enable optimal working processes.

Functional immunity of the leadership of the ORC

In line with the Ombudsman Act, the Ombudsman and his/her deputies enjoy immunity as do members of the Croatian Parliament and the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia on immunity in the Croatian Parliament are applied appropriately. Under these provisions, they cannot be held criminally liable, detained or sentenced for an opinion expressed.

The ORC's staff have the status of civil servants. Pursuant to the Civil Service Act, civil servants have the right to the protection of their physical and moral integrity in the performance of their duties. They are also obliged to refuse to execute an order that is illegal or whose execution would be contrary to the rules of the profession and the code of ethics, or whose execution could cause greater damage, or the execution of an order whose execution would constitute a criminal offense or misdemeanour.

Furthermore, any complaints by a civil servant due to justified suspicion of corruption or the filing of a report on such suspicion to responsible persons or competent state bodies do not constitute a justified reason for the termination of civil service, and the protection of anonymity, protection from denial or restriction of rights and protection from any form of abuse in the event of filing a report are guaranteed.

Threats faced by the ORC

There are several challenges that the ORC encountered during the reporting period: premises of ORC, salaries of ORC staff, timely discussion of Annual Reports as well as threats received by the Ombudswoman.

The Office of the Ombudswoman has been located at a temporary address for

the past 4 years because the former office building was severely damaged in the 2020 earthquake. However, the reconstruction process has not started to this date, while at the same time the number of employees has increased in the past 4 years and temporary premises are not adequate. The office is located in a space the ORC rents at commercial price and pays high reserve costs. Finally, security wise, these premises are less secure than the ones previously occupied (there is no security staff or metal detectors in the entrance to the building/premises of the ORC). These are all reasons why the existing space is inadequate for the needs of the office and that it would be needed to find new space in the coming period, suitable for the accommodation of all employees and officials but also to be accessible to citizens.

Over the years, the Ombudswoman has received various derogatory remarks and insults etc., both in emails sent to her/the institution and in publicly made comments (comments on online media articles, on social media etc.). She also received two anonymous written letters with threats, which she reported to the police. So far, from the information we have, the perpetrator(s) have not been found.

NHRI's recommendations to national authorities

The ORC recommends to national authorities to:

1. discuss annual reports of the Ombudswoman in a timely manner (in the year they were submitted) in the Croatian Parliament,
2. ensure more systematic response to information requests of the ORC to competent bodies relating to complaints handled by the ORC,
3. provide the institution of the Ombudswoman with the additional human resources in line with the international mechanisms' recommendations and new mandates assigned to it.

Croatia 2025

Information from: Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia

Human rights defenders and civil society space

Laws and measures negatively impacting civil society and Human Rights Defenders

The ORC's human rights monitoring and reporting found evidence of state measures that negatively impact on freedom of association, freedom of

expression, create barriers in access to information and law and policymaking processes, or criminalise human rights defenders' work. While there are no national policies or laws directly aimed at creating barriers for the activities of human rights defenders, instances were recorded of state action negatively impacting them and/or aiming to block them.

Pressure on civic environmental initiatives

Croatia does not have policies or laws directly aimed at creating barriers for the activities of human rights defenders. However, instances were recorded of actions taken by various state bodies that negatively impacted them. For example, in one of the cases, a HRD complained that state inspections were being used as a tool to cause pressure on a civic environmental initiative.

Access to law and policy making processes by CSOs and HRDs

As regards the access to policy/law making processes, generally [CSO are pointing to the fact](#) that their inputs are not considered and that public consultations are only of formalistic nature. Additionally, CSOs point that it is not clear how CSOs are included in Working Groups responsible for drafting legislation and policies.

Lack of adequate funding for CSOs and heavy administrative burden in the project-management cycles

CSOs continue flagging the lack of adequate funding for organizations focused on the protection and promotion of human rights, combatting discrimination, advocacy, anticorruption and transparency, watchdog activities, environmental protection and report on the excessive administrative burden placed on them in the project-management cycles, as well as public calls and the payments being late, which puts a strain on their activities.

Lack of access to the reception centres for asylum seekers for CSOs working with international protection seekers and migrants

Most of the CSOs working with international protection seekers and migrants still do not have the access to the reception centres for asylum seekers and to the reception centre for foreigners since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, despite their being a need for their services, such as free legal aid provision.

Lack of adoption of the new National Plan for the Creation of Favourable Conditions for the Civil Society

The [previous](#) document having expired in 2016, Croatia has still not adopted the new National Plan for the Creation of Favourable Conditions for the Civil Society, thus lacking the policy framework for further improving the legal, financial and institutional support system for the activities of civil society organisations. Moreover, CSOs have continuously been flagging the decline in

the functioning of the institutional infrastructure set up for the state cooperation with the civil society prior to Croatia's EU accession.

ORC's support to women human rights defenders and LGBTQ+ human rights defenders

Monitoring human rights and the conditions for work of human rights defenders, the ORC pays special attention to HRDs groups known to be targeted more often, including groups working on women's and reproductive rights and those working on LGBTIQ+ rights and flags the fact that they face extra pressures and challenges in her annual reports. Several CSOs working in the areas of women's human rights, gender equality, reproductive rights and gender-based violence are members of the ORC's network of antidiscrimination contact points, which the ORC consults and discusses with them the current developments and challenges in the areas they cover. Several CSOs working on women's and LGBTQ+ rights are regular contributors to the annual report, thus providing a direct insight into the barriers they are facing.

Practices negatively impacting civil society and human rights defenders

The ORC's human rights monitoring and reporting found evidence of practices that could negatively impact on civil society space and/or reduce human rights defenders' activities, such as verbal or physical attacks on civil society organisations and/or human rights defenders, their work and environment, negative attitudes/campaigns towards/perceptions of civil society and/or human rights defenders by public authorities and the general public, online and/or offline threats or harassment, intimidation, harassment or violence before, during or after protests, harassment in the form of excessive administrative controls or audits, or surveillance by state actors, strategic lawsuits against public participation – SLAPPs.

Excessive administrative burden and pressure on CSOs

CSOs continue to report on the excessive administrative burden placed on them in the project-management cycles, as well as public calls and the payments being late, which puts a strain on their activities, whereas human rights defenders dealing with women's human rights, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+' rights, transitional justice and environmental matters continue to be more intensely targeted by pressures, attacks and harassment.

SLAPP lawsuits against journalists, media professionals and environmental CSOs

SLAPP lawsuits continue to have a major impact on media freedom, which act as a deterrent to journalists and media professionals. The situation could be

improved by the ongoing efforts (including the establishment of a working group for the transposition of EU directive, the work of National Coordinating Committee for the Implementation of measures of the Action plan for the development of culture and media and the campaign of the Council of Europe and the OSCE for the safety of journalists) to transpose the Anti-SLAPP Directive, which applies to civil and commercial cases (representatives of the ORC are taking part in the work of this Working group).

In addition, physical attacks and threats against journalists are still present. In its [2024 Annual Report](#) the ORC highlighted that the legal mechanisms are still unevenly applied for the protection of journalists. For example, municipal state attorney office concluded that there is no criminal liability for the attacker in Nadine, who physically attacked a journalist on a work assignment in public space and who identified herself as such to the attacker and who was accompanied by a cameraman. Although the attacker stated that he attacked a journalist because she recorded his real estate from public space area, a misdemeanour order and a ban on approaching, establishing and maintaining a connection to each other at a distance of not less than 50m was issued against the attacker as well as the victim. This shows that journalists continue to suffer from the uncertainty of whether they will receive adequate criminal-legal protection while performing their work tasks if they are physically attacked.

Along with journalists, environmental CSOs are being targeted with SLAPP lawsuits and report the use of inspections with the aim of intimidation and of blocking their activities ([Kardov, K., Represija nad okolišnim inicijativama i organizacijama civilnog društva u Hrvatskoj, Zagreb, September 2024](#)).

Continuous physical attacks and threats against journalists, environmental initiatives and CSOs working on particular topics

Physical attacks and threats against journalists are still present. Although the [Protocol on the conduct of the police, journalists and other media professionals at public gatherings of public interest and the Protocol on the conduct of the police when learning of a criminal offence committed against journalists and other media professionals in the performance of their duties have been adopted](#), adequate implementation of these protocols is lacking.

Moreover, according to [Kardov](#) in 2024, environmental initiatives seem to have been the groups most exposed to physical attacks and harassment during protests. For example, [environmental defenders](#) were subjected to the breaking of peaceful resistance by a private security company securing a building site. In another case, the media reported about the violence committed by the police and the security against climate activists protesting against fossil fuels.

HRDs are also faced with online threats and harassment. In 2024, the ORC also recorded incidents of threats and attacks aimed at those CSOs dealing with

transitional justice and environmental matters. For example, having conducted a public campaign, a CSO dealing with transitional justice received a series of threats by post and via social media, issued by private individuals.

HRDs dealing with women's rights, reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ rights being targeted

Human rights defenders dealing with women's rights, reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ topics are continuously among the most commonly and intensely targeted groups.

For example, prayer gatherings have been held every first Saturday of the month in the main square in Zagreb and in several cities across Croatia since October 2022 have particularly attracted attention, as well as public controversy, due to some of the 'prayer intentions' of the participants: to become spiritual authorities in the family, for a life of premarital purity, for chastity in dress and behaviour, and for the renewal of Catholic marriages, for an end to abortion and openness to life for married couples.

Protests, or counter-protests, were held at the same time as the prayer gatherings, highlighting women's rights and gender equality.

In relation to securing those gatherings, the police officers have, at some occasions, treated unequally (counter)protestors defending women's rights and those taking part in the prayer gatherings, whereas these have also been issues of potentially conflicting rights (e.g. religious freedom/freedom of assembly/freedom of expression of those gathering in public prayer versus freedom of expression, including artistic expressions and freedom of assembly of protestors).

Additionally, the current legal framework regarding the maintenance of public order and peace at public gatherings sometimes leads to different understandings of 'organizers' duties' and the duties of police authorities for protecting security and public order when securing public gatherings.

Transnational repression of human rights defenders:

In the midst of the student protests in Serbia beginning in November 2024, in December 2024, according to Croatian media reports, [personal information of a Croatian journalist was published and his ID card shown in live program by a Serbian TV station, with the journalist being accused of "aiding and abetting" the protestors](#). Additionally, in January 2025 Croatian [media reported on several Croatian CSO members attending a workshop in Belgrade being questioned by the police, expelled from the country and being served with a one-year entry ban due to, ostensibly, "presenting a security risk", prompting the reaction by both the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs as well as of the European Commission](#).

Strategies and initiatives to protect human rights defenders at the national level

There are no specific laws or mechanisms for the protection of civil society and human rights defenders at the national level.

Moreover, Croatia has not adopted for years the strategic policy document aimed at the creation of favourable conditions for civil society. Creating a policy framework to guide normative, institutional and financial measures as well as rendering the institutional framework for the cooperation between the civil society and the state again would be a welcomed step in making the conditions for the work of human rights defenders more conducive.

When it comes to journalists and environmental human rights defenders (but also possibly others in the future), normative solutions aimed at early recognition and dismissal of SLAPP lawsuits are key, and currently there is a Working Group working on transposing the Directive.

Activities of NHRIs to support civil society space and Human Rights Defenders

In 2024, the ORC has taken initiatives to promote civil society space and human rights defenders, such as the organization of joint meetings and/or roundtables or including a specific chapter in the ORC's annual report on the situation of human rights defenders. This also serves as an awareness raising tool aimed at both the relevant state actors as well as the general public, informing them about the importance of the human rights defenders' work and of the creation of the favourable environment for it, of their contributions but also about the obstacles they face, including recommendations on the possible ways to remove those obstacles.

Additionally, the ORC has set up a network of anti-discrimination contact points, CSOs with whom it regularly shares information relating to their work as HRDs.

Moreover, in 2024, the ORC has also taken actions to protect civil society space and human rights defenders (HRDs), such as monitoring, complaints handling, issuing recommendations & opinions, capacity building, or through NHRI's specific/additional mandates.

The ORC is a multi-mandated institution with the mandates of the ombudsman, an NHRI, a national equality body, the NPM, and whistle-blowers' protection and engages in the protection of the civil society space and, more broadly, of human rights defenders through its various mandates.

It monitors the situation and reports annually to the Croatian Parliament as well as internationally. ORC receives complaints submitted by the HRDs and issues

recommendations, addressing both the perpetrators of individual violations as well as pointing to systemic issues and suggesting possible solutions.

From the Adoption of the Act on the Protection of the [Persons](#) Reporting Irregularities, the ORC is the body responsible for the external reporting of irregularities, which also monitors the implementation of the protection of whistleblowers.

Finally, the ORC regularly provides capacity building to the civil society actors. Thus, for instance, [one of the activities in the FRA/ENNHRI project “Support to National Human Rights Institutions in the Monitoring of Human Rights and the Rule of Law” was an educational session on the Charter of Fundamental Rights for civil society actors](#). We are also currently conducting 2 EU-funded projects with CSO partners, also including various capacity-building activities (FRED - Fostering Racial Equality and Diversity and SURE - Strategies for Using Rights and Achieving Equality, both are CERV funded).

Engagement of the ORC with international and regional mechanisms in support of human rights defenders and civil society

In its Rule of Law Reports, the European Commission regularly assesses the situation of civil society actors at the national level. Via its own recommendations, the ORC supports the rectification of the identified barriers in this area. Additionally, in its [alternative report](#) to the UN Committee on Human Rights, the ORC reported on challenges faced by CSOs.

NHRI’s recommendations to national and regional authorities

The ORC recommends to the Government of Croatia to:

1. adopt the National Plan for the Creation of the Enabling Environment for the Civil Society;
2. provide consistent and multiannual funding for the organizations focused on the protection and promotion of human rights and combatting discrimination;
3. By law, regulate the right of citizens to participate in decision-making.

The ORC recommends to the European Commission to:

1. adopt the EU civil society strategy,
2. make funding more flexible and speedy, especially in relation to quickly changing needs and human rights priorities.

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Functioning of justice systems

Based on the human rights monitoring and reporting, the ORC identified significant challenges affecting access to justice and/or effective judicial protection in the areas including independence and impartiality of judiciary, delays in court proceedings, access to legal aid, professionalism, specialisation and training of judges, timely and effective execution of national courts' judgments.

Amendment of legislation on the functioning of the judiciary

During 2024, several laws significant for improving the functioning of the judiciary were amended and supplemented, namely the Courts Act, the Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Act, the Protection from Domestic Violence Act and the Land Registry Act, and the Delivery of Court Documents Act and the new Administrative Disputes Act were adopted.

White strike of judges and state attorneys

Poor working conditions and the problem of salaries resulted in open expressions of dissatisfaction among judges and state attorneys, and a so-called "white strike" was held from 22 January to 2 February 2024, because salaries and other material rights of judicial officials had not been regulated by the end of 2023, in accordance with the Government's promise.

At a meeting held on 23 February 2024 in the Government of the Republic of Croatia, an agreement was reached with representatives of the Association of Croatian Judges and the Association of State Attorneys on increasing the base for calculating the salaries of judicial officials, coefficients for county court judges and presidents of first and second instance judges, as well as on the material rights of judges and state attorneys.

After the end of the strike and after the agreement was reached, the Act on Amendments to the Act on Salaries and Other Material Rights of Judicial Officials was adopted (Official Gazette 35/24 of 22 March 2024, which entered into force on 1 April 2024).

Independence and impartiality of the judiciary

Regarding the independence and impartiality of judiciary and according to the results of the Eurobarometer from February 2024, 37% of surveyed citizens in the Republic of Croatia assessed the independence of courts and judges as poor, and 32% of them as very poor, and despite a slight improvement compared to 2023, the Republic of Croatia is still facing a negative perception

of the independence of courts and judges.

According to data from the State Judicial Council, in 2024, 60 judges were resolved/relieved of duty (of which 38 at their own request, while 17 due to reaching the age of 70, three judges died, one judge due to taking up office in another judicial body, and one due to permanent loss of ability to perform judicial duties).

According to data from the State Judicial Council, in 2024, nine disciplinary proceedings were initiated against judges, and 15 decisions were made in which one reprimand, three fines, three dismissals from the exercise of judicial office were issued, while in two cases the judges were acquitted of committing disciplinary offences, and in six cases a decision was made to suspend the disciplinary proceedings. The disciplinary proceedings were conducted due to improper performance of judicial office, failure to comply with a decision made in the procedure for the protection of the right to a trial within a reasonable time, and causing damage to the reputation of the court or judicial office in another way. Due to the disciplinary offence of improper performance of judicial office, three judges were suspended from exercising judicial office during the disciplinary proceedings, until the disciplinary penalty of dismissal was imposed.

Furthermore, in 47 cases, the State Judicial Council was requested to initiate criminal proceedings against judges, and 37 requests were rejected, while 10 procedures are ongoing. All requests were received from parties to court proceedings who were dissatisfied with the course and outcome of the court proceedings and are requesting authorization to initiate criminal proceedings against judges. In all these proceedings, the competent state attorney's office previously dismissed the criminal charges against the judges, and the parties were instructed to take over the criminal prosecution.

Digitalization of the judiciary

The digitalization of the judiciary should be seen as the important factor that contributes to reducing the number of unresolved court cases and shortening court proceedings, and its goal is transparent and efficient management of the judicial system.

Public e-services (e-Communication, e-Case, e-Notice Board, e-Certificate that no criminal proceedings are being conducted, etc.) should accelerate the efficiency of administrative systems, optimize administrative business processes and thus improve the quality of the judicial system, and for users of e-services this means a faster, more efficient way of obtaining information and solving problems, without physically going to the counter.

Since 1 January 2025, anonymized court decisions of Croatian courts have been publicly available, which should make it easier for citizens to represent their

legal interests before the court and improve judicial accountability, transparency, legitimacy and representativeness.

Territorial fragmentation of the activities of primary legal aid providers and low compensation

Citizens are still not sufficiently familiar with the possibility of directly addressing authorized primary legal aid providers and with the conditions for realizing the right to legal representation and exemption from court costs and court fees. Therefore, the ORC recommended that the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation continuously implement activities to inform the public about the free legal aid system, for example, through promotional activities using the media.

There is a problem of significant territorial fragmentation of the activities of primary legal aid providers, which leads to insufficient availability of free legal aid, because most providers operate in the capital and larger urban centres, while free legal aid is mostly unavailable in rural and isolated areas.

Also, in some parts of Croatia there is a lack of lawyers providing free legal aid. One of the reasons for the reduced interest of lawyers is the low point value on the basis of which the compensation for the free legal aid provided is determined. Therefore, the Ombudsman continuously points out to the Ministry the need to increase the point value of the lawyer's tariff for representation within the free legal aid system.

Need to improve the follow-up and implementation by state authorities of European Courts' judgments

In ORC's view, there is room for involving other stakeholders in the process of enforcing judgments and decisions of the ECtHR, for example, the Croatian Parliament through the work of the competent Committees, in order to prevent potential systemic violations of the Convention. Furthermore, the ORC considers that it would be useful to ensure the active and continuous participation of civil society and the academic community in the process of the drafting of action plans and action reports, through the work of the Expert Council for the Enforcement of Judgments and Decisions of the ECtHR. The ORC, however, is a member of the Expert Council and contributes to its work.

Actions taken by the ORC to support the implementation of the European Courts' judgments

The ORC has undertaken actions to support implementation of the European Courts' judgments, such as previous Rule 9 submissions to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, referring to the judgments of European Courts' in the reports and recommendations to state authorities, engagement with a national coordinator of the execution of judgments of the European

Court of Human Rights, as well as awareness raising of the general public.

ORC's systematic monitoring of the compliance of the national legislation and actions of public law bodies with the ECtHR's case law

The ORC systematically monitors the compliance of the national legislation and the actions of the public law bodies with ECtHR's case-law. In accordance with the observed shortcomings, whether through non-compliance or inadequate application by the competent bodies of the national legislation in a large number of individual cases, we identify priority areas/cases. These are the areas in which systemic problems have been observed, either through the content of complaints the ORC receives and in which it has previously acted, or through the issues detected through the activities of the National Preventive Mechanism (for example, the situation in prisons).

In accordance with the identified priorities, the institution is involved in monitoring the execution of individual ECtHR judgments from the initial stage of the drafting of the action plans. As members of the Expert Council for the Execution of the Judgments and the Decisions of the ECtHR, the ORC points out specific issues related to the execution of judgments in a specific legal area.

Participation in the procedure for the execution of the judgments of the ECtHR

Regarding the participation of the ORC in the procedure for the execution of the judgment in the case of [M. H. et al. v. Croatia](#) (App. no. 15670/18), which is under enhanced enforcement supervision, and in which the ORC submitted a Rule 9 communication in 2023, in June 2024 the institution submitted comments on the revised action plan to the Office of the Representative of the Republic of Croatia before the ECtHR.

Dedicated chapter in the ORC's annual report on the ECtHR's case law

One of the chapters of the ORC's annual report is dedicated to the ECtHR's case-law in relation to Croatia. In this section, the ORC addresses developments related to the proceedings of the ECtHR, for example, the adoption of new rules of procedure regarding the submission of applications, etc., and provides a concise overview of the content of the judgments and decisions issued by the ECtHR in relation to Croatia, explaining which violation of Convention took place and what it consists of, taking into account the factual and legal context of the case.

A statistical overview of the number of cases in enforcement and those for which the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers' supervision procedure has been completed is included as well, as are the amounts of the pecuniary damages paid from the state budget.

Croatia 2025

Information from: Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia

Media freedom, pluralism and safety of journalists

According to the ORC, there are several current challenges that affect media freedom, including SLAPP lawsuits, the introduction of the new Article 307.a. of the Criminal Code "Unauthorized disclosure of the contents of investigative or evidentiary proceedings", physical attacks and threats against journalists, and the non-application of the police Protocols on the conduct of journalists when they are attacked, and the lack of application of Article 315.b. of the Criminal Code "Coercion against a person performing tasks of public interest or in public service", as well as the issue of transparency of media ownership.

SLAPP lawsuits

Although we do not have exact data on the number of SLAPP proceedings, the transposition of the Anti-SLAPP Directive should support its decrease. With its implementation, relevant stakeholders will be obliged to adequately collect data on the number of SLAPP proceedings, and mechanisms for the early recognition and rejection of such malicious lawsuits should also be designed.

Amendments to the Criminal Code

A challenge to media freedom has been brought by the amendments to the Criminal Code. On the one hand, Article 307.a. punishes persons who, during the first stages of proceedings (which are secret), disclose the content without authorization. Although this article excludes illegality for a journalist and someone who acts to protect the victim of a criminal offense, in the interest of the defense in criminal proceedings or in another predominantly public interest, there is a fear that journalistic sources could still suffer certain inconveniences during the conduct of investigative actions.

Attacks and threats against journalists and media workers

The performance of journalistic work is also negatively affected by attacks and threats to which journalists and media workers are exposed. In order to prevent this, Article 315.b. of the Criminal Code and the Protocol on Police Conduct upon Learning of a Criminal Offense Committed to the Detriment of Journalists and Other Media Workers in the Performance of Their Work Tasks were introduced. However, according to our knowledge, the Protocol is inconsistently and inadequately applied, which may also affect the smaller number of criminal

proceedings under Article 315.b. committed to the detriment of a journalist as a person performing tasks in the public interest.

The issue of real and hidden ownership of the media

In addition to all of the above, the issue of real and hidden ownership of the media has a negative impact on media freedom. Although covert ownership of the media is prohibited due to the protection of media pluralism, in reality there are some doubts about the adequate application of the norms that prescribe it. The aforementioned problems related to the transparency of ownership which could be influenced by adequate supervision over the application of the Law on Electronic Media.

Measures taken to follow-up on the recommendations concerning media freedom issued by European actors

In order to implement the EC Recommendation of 16 September 2021 on ensuring the protection, safety and strengthening of the position of journalists and other media workers in the EU, two police protocols related to the safety of journalists have been adopted: the Protocol on the conduct of police, journalists and other media workers at public gatherings of public interest and the Protocol on the conduct of police when learning of a criminal offence committed against journalists and other media workers in the performance of their duties.

NHRI's recommendations to national and regional authorities

The ORC recommends to national authorities to:

1. increase the safety of journalists. This refers to the prevention and prosecution of attacks and threats against journalists and the adequate implementation of all related procedures (police and public prosecutors),
2. increase efforts to remove other factors that act as a deterrent to the journalism profession. This primarily refers to the reduction of SLAPP lawsuits, but also malicious and unfounded criminal proceedings aimed at deterring journalists from reporting on topics of public interest,
3. increase media transparency. Regulatory bodies that monitor the implementation of relevant laws related to this topic play a significant role.

Croatia 2025

Information from: Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia

Other challenges to the rule of law and human rights

Introduction of a new criminal offence

Amendments to the Criminal Code, which entered into force on March 14, 2024, introduced a new criminal offence in its Art. 307.a. - unauthorised disclosure of the contents of an investigative report or evidentiary actions in criminal proceedings.

Although the new paragraph 3 of Art. 307.a. provides for grounds for excluding the illegality of this act if it was committed in the “predominantly public interest”, which would, presumably, also relate to the disclosure of certain information to the public in the context of reporting irregularities in accordance with the Act on Protection of Persons Reporting Irregularities, we consider that the wording is still not entirely satisfactory in the context of the application of the Act on Protection of Persons Reporting Irregularities:

- primarily – it is unclear what exactly will be the criteria for the assessment of whether the public interest prevails in a particular case,
- possible non-compliance with the Act on Protection of Persons Reporting Irregularities – in accordance with Art. 10 par. 1, if persons report information about irregularities or disclose it publicly in accordance with the Act, they shall not be considered to have violated any restriction regarding the disclosure of information and shall in no way be held responsible for such a report or public disclosure, provided that they had a justified reason to believe that the report or public disclosure of that information was necessary for the purpose of exposing irregularities based on this Act.
- all irregularities relating to the provisions of national law may be reported under the Act on Protection of Persons Reporting Irregularities, if such irregularities also undermine the public interest (not predominantly) - accordingly, the Act does not seek for the public interest to prevail when reporting, but it is essential only that the reported irregularities undermine, irrespective of the extent to which, the public interest
- consequences of non-compliance - legal uncertainty of reporting persons who should be protected by the Act on Protection of Persons Reporting Irregularities because they act primarily in the public interest; the fear of criminal sanctions due to the possibility that the State Attorney's Office or the court, based on currently insufficiently clear criteria, will subsequently assess that the public interest did not prevail when reporting irregularities according to Act on Protection of Persons Reporting Irregularities (although the public interest as such

clearly existed), will act as a deterrent to potential reporting persons.

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