

# LIBERTIES

# RULE OF LAW

# REPORT

# 2026



CIVIL  
LIBERTIES  
UNION FOR  
EUROPE



CENTAR  
ZA MIROVNE  
STUDIJE



#roi-report2026

# CROATIA



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## FOREWORD

The Liberties Rule of Law Report 2026 is the seventh annual report on the state of rule of law in the European Union (EU) published by the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties). Liberties is a non-governmental civil society organisation promoting the civil liberties of everyone in the EU, and it is built on a network of national civil liberties groups from across the EU. Currently, we have member organisations in Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden, as well as a contributing partner organisation in Greece.

Liberties, together with its members and partner organisations, carries out advocacy, campaigning and public education activities to explain what the rule of law is, what the EU and national governments are doing to protect or harm it, and gathers public support to press leaders at EU and national level to fully respect, promote and protect our basic rights and values.

Drafted by Liberties and its member and partner organisations, the 2026 report covers the situation during 2025 with the purpose of providing the European Commission with reliable information and analysis from the ground to feed its own rule of law reports, and to provide an independent analysis of the state of the rule of law in the EU in its own right. Liberties' report represents the most in-depth reporting exercise carried out to date by a civil society network to map developments in a wide range of areas connected to the rule of law in the EU.

The 2026 report includes EU-wide trend analysis in the justice system, anti-corruption framework, media freedom, checks and balances, based on 22 country reports that follow a common structure, mirroring and expanding on the priority areas and indicators identified by the European Commission for its annual rule of law monitoring cycle. Nearly 40 organisations contributed to the compilation of these country reports. The 2026 report places particular emphasis on the recommendations made by the European Commission and how, in the assessment of Liberties' members, they have been implemented. Specific gaps were identified alongside new issues that arose in 2025.

**[Download the full Liberties Rule of Law Report 2026 here.](#)**

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# CROATIA

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTING ORGANISATIONS

### Centre for Peace Studies



Centre for Peace Studies (CPS) is a civil society organisation that protects human rights and strives for social change based on the values of democracy, anti-fascism, nonviolence, peacemaking, solidarity, and equality. It uses activism, education, research, advocacy, and direct support. We work with communities, initiatives, organisations, media, institutions, and individuals in Croatia and internationally. The vision of CPS is a society of solidarity, openness, and nonviolence, where institutions enable peace, social security, political and economic equality, and freedom for all people. Members of society actively participate in decision-making, managing public goods, and developing their communities, all while maintaining a balance with the environment. We operate through four complementary programs: Education and Empowerment for Social Change, Protection and Promotion of the Right to Asylum and Migration, Supporting Inclusive Society, and Affirmation of Economic and Social Rights.

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## OVERALL ASSESSMENT: DISMANTLER

In 2025, there was no progress regarding different aspects of the rule of law in Croatia. After the 2024 parliamentary elections, the coalition of Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Domovinski pokret, a far-right party, holds a parliamentary majority and forms the government.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, certain issues visible in the last two terms of the Croatian government, led by Andrej Plenković, continued in this period, while there were serious regressions in several areas. The public use of the ‘Za dom spremni’ salute and other Ustaša symbols surged (used by the Ustaša regime during the Nazi-puppet state NDH in Croatia),<sup>2</sup> notably during a concert by a singer who glorifies the pro-fascist NDH regime, attended by several Ministers and Members of Parliament (MPs), and endorsed by the Prime Minister.<sup>3</sup> Despite repeated facts that the salute is unconstitutional, lower courts began acquitting individuals for chanting it, often invoking non-binding political documents or non-existent legal exceptions. This judicial practice, coupled with political endorsement, has contributed to the downplaying and relativization of the salute in public discourse. Public trust in the judiciary remained low, and no serious steps were taken to restore the trust and to solve the main issues in the judiciary. Moreover, Croatia has made little progress in strengthening its anti-corruption framework, with systemic weaknesses persisting in judicial independence, prosecutorial leadership, and enforcement of key legislative reforms. Transparency deficits in lobbying and public procurement remain, while high-profile corruption cases continue without visible accountability, undermining public trust. Without decisive reforms, this stagnation risks becoming structural and further entrenching corruption. The situation has also been worsening regarding the freedom of the media. Formal initiatives are failing to address long-standing concerns or protect independent journalism. Politically motivated pressure, attacks on journalists, and structural weaknesses continue to chill public-interest reporting, while key recommendations on state advertising transparency and anti-Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (anti-SLAPPS) protections remain unimplemented. Limited procedural measures exist, but without binding reforms and genuine political commitment, these problems risk becoming increasingly entrenched. When

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1 [Index.hr](https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/evo-tko-je-sve-dao-potpise-plenkovicu/2563898.aspx), Zna se kojih 78 je potpisalo za Plenkovića (It is known which 78 signed for Plenković), 10 May 2024, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/evo-tko-je-sve-dao-potpise-plenkovicu/2563898.aspx>.

2 The origins of this salute are linked to a specific period, the period of World War II and to the Ustaša regime. In the quisling Independent State of Croatia (NDH), created under Ustaša leadership, the salute “ZDS” was officially used. It came to represent a regime grounded in hatred as state policy—terror and the destruction of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and others deemed incompatible with the NDH’s racist ideology. The salute appeared on official documents, including orders for persecution, expropriation, imprisonment, and execution of people of “undesirable” nationalities. Accordingly, invoking this salute today conveys the meaning of exclusion and hatred, and an affirmation or positive reinterpretation of the genocidal Ustaša rule.

3 [Index.hr](https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/zasto-hdz-odjednom-ocajnicki-brani-ustaski-pozdrav/2688555.aspx), Why HDZ desperately defends Ustasha salute (Zašto HDZ očajnički brani ustaški pozdrav), 9 July 2025, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/zasto-hdz-odjednom-ocajnicki-brani-ustaski-pozdrav/2688555.aspx>.

it comes to checks and balances, independent institutions like the Ombudswoman are sidelined, and reports on urgent issues made by such independent institutions are discussed in the parliament with years of delay. Civil society organisations face insufficient funding, limited influence in decision-making, and smear campaigns, while public consultations are often short or bypassed entirely. The National Plan for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development has not been adopted for 10 years.<sup>4</sup> Attacks on cultural events, minority initiatives, and the restricted access to St. Mark's Square further illustrates the narrowing space for civic participation. A large part of St. Mark's square has been closed by the government since 2020, after an attack on the government by an individual. The government claims that the square is closed for security reasons, although there is no evidence that the attack was anything other than an isolated incident.<sup>5</sup>

### **Assessment of the trajectory**

Croatia continued to be a dismantler in terms of the rule of law in 2025. Judiciary, anti-corruption framework, and checks and balances are continuously becoming weaker. Actors such as independent media, civil society and independent institutions are losing influence and/or resources. Under these circumstances, society is more and more divided along ideological lines. At the same time, groups such as minorities, critical journalists, activists, artists, cultural organisations, and opposition politicians are being targeted without proper response and/or endorsement by the politicians in power.

## **ACTIVATING OTHER PARTS OF THE EU RULE OF LAW TOOLBOX**

The European Commission should base their recommendations on a more thorough monitoring and analysis of the implementation of recommendations. Also, the Commission should make sure that there is a concrete and tangible follow-up to recommendations, set clear indicators both in terms of the steps to be taken by the competent institutions, but also the impact those steps make. Also, other parts of the rule of law toolbox should be triggered in case of repeating recommendations and in areas in which, despite recommendations, there is no tangible progress or in which there is regression.

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4 European Commission, 2025 Rule of Law Report, [https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en).

5 Gong, Gong asked the Constitutional Court to assess constitutionality of closing St. Mark's Square, (Gong zatražio od Ustavnog suda da ispita ustavnost zatvaranja Markovog trga), <https://gong.hr/2023/07/27/gong-zatražio-od-ustavnog-suda-da-ispita-ustavnost-zatvaranja-markovog-trga/>.

In addition, there are areas in which the European Commission should consider the launch of infringement proceedings, such as the area of independence of judiciary, media, and civic space.

### **State of play (versus 2025)**

- Justice system
- Anti-corruption framework
- Media Environment and Media Freedom
- Checks and balances

### **Legend**

Regression      No progress      Progress



## JUSTICE SYSTEM -

### General assessment

In 2025, no meaningful progress can be identified regarding the quality, fairness and efficiency of the justice system in Croatia. On the contrary, recent developments further illustrate structural deficiencies that have been repeatedly highlighted in previous years.

Access to justice remains seriously constrained. The financial thresholds for secondary legal aid continue to require that the total monthly income of the applicant and all household members does not exceed €441.44 per household member, and that the total value of their assets does not exceed €26,486.16 (60 budgetary bases).<sup>6</sup> These cumulative criteria exclude a significant number of low-income individuals, including persons working for the statutory minimum wage. At the same time, lawyers' fees remain high. As a result, many individuals, particularly migrants and other vulnerable groups, are effectively unable to secure legal representation.

Prolonged pre-investigation phases in criminal matters,<sup>7</sup> particularly in pushback cases<sup>8</sup> remains a structural issue. The six-month deadline for pre-investigation procedures continues to operate without consequences if exceeded. These risks undermine the effectiveness of investigations under the standards of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and weaken public trust in accountability mechanisms.

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6 Republic of Croatia, Zakon o besplatnoj pravnoj pomoći (Free Legal Aid Act), Official Gazette no. 143/13, <https://www.zakon.hr/z/286/zakon-o-besplatnoj-pravnoj-pomoci>.

7 According to the Annual Report on the Work of the State Attorney's Office for 2024, 38.9% of all complaints under review remained unresolved, representing a slight increase compared to 37% in 2023. (State Attorney's Office of the Republic of Croatia, 2025, <https://dorh.hr/sites/default/files/dokumenti/2025-04/Izvje%C5%A1%C4%87e%20o%20radu%20dr%C5%BEavnih%20odvjetni%C5%A1tava%20za%202024.%20godinu.pdf>).

8 In October 2021, a group of investigative journalists published disturbing footage showing masked men beating migrants and forcibly pushing them across a branch of the Korana River from Croatian territory into Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the video, one of the masked men can be heard telling the migrants: "Go to Bosnia." Following the publication of the footage, a criminal complaint was filed against the police officers involved. The investigative phase lasted until 2025, when the criminal complaint was ultimately dismissed. See Raić, A. (2025, February 5). The Ministry of the Interior sanctioned police officers who were violent toward migrants. For the State Attorney's Office, everything was fine. Index.hr. Available at <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/mup-kaznio-policaјce-koјi-su-bili-nasilni-prema-migrantima-za-dorh-je-sve-bilo-ok/2639572.aspx>.

The deficiencies of the system were clearly demonstrated in 2025 by the final judgment of the ECtHR in *Y.K. v. Croatia*,<sup>9</sup> a case in which the applicant had been denied access to asylum, legal representation and effective judicial protection before being expelled. This judgment demonstrates that previously identified shortcomings—lack of access to legal aid, ineffective remedies, prolonged procedures, and limited judicial scrutiny—are not isolated incidents but structural features. Despite earlier warnings and prior case-law, no comprehensive reforms have been implemented to ensure effective access to asylum procedures, legal representation, and remedies with suspensive effect. The judgment is particularly significant because it exposes systemic weaknesses. Importantly, the Court rejected the argument that a constitutional complaint constitutes an effective remedy in such cases, noting the absence of automatic suspensive effect and the length of proceedings.

Overall, the trajectory in 2025 reflects institutional stagnation. Early warning signs - such as normalised delays, limited accountability for missed deadlines, and increasing economic barriers to justice - are not being adequately addressed. While the existing digital infrastructure and formal procedural reforms provide a basis for improvement, they remain under-utilised. Without targeted legislative and institutional action, current deficiencies risk becoming structurally entrenched.

### **Implementation of 2025 Commission recommendations**

**Recommendation: Take measures to further improve the efficiency of justice, particularly as regards the length of proceedings in litigious commercial and civil cases (first made in 2025)**

The government reported a decrease of 3% in the number of unresolved cases from 2024 to 2025, where this number at the end of 2024 was 445,000 compared to 435,000 reported at the end of 2025. The Minister of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation also shared that the average duration of all court proceedings is 126 days, and when it comes to civil and commercial cases, the average duration of proceedings is 480 days.<sup>10</sup>

9 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), *Y.K. v. Croatia*, application No. 38776/21, 17 July 2025, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-244097%22%5D%7D>.

10 Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation of the Republic of Croatia (2026), *Question Time: Figures clearly show that justice is being relieved, gradually and systematically*, 15 January 2026, <https://mpudt.gov.hr/news-25399/question-time-figures-clearly-show-that-justice-is-being-relieved-gradually-and-systematically/30605?utm>.

In November 2025, amendments to the Courts Act<sup>11</sup> were adopted which, according to the government, are intended to improve the efficiency of the judiciary; however, it remains to be seen whether these amendments will in fact achieve that result.

However, the procedures are, as seen above, still lengthy, and the justice system in Croatia enjoys low public confidence.

Particularly, Croatia should address structural delays that originate in earlier procedural phases and affect overall judicial performance. Prolonged prosecutorial inaction not only undermines accountability in criminal matters but can indirectly delay related civil and commercial claims (e.g., damages proceedings or disputes dependent on factual findings established in criminal investigations).

The recommendation is relatively clear but steps to take are not clearly articulated. The Commission could improve the recommendation:

*Take all necessary measures to enhance the efficiency of the justice system and reduce the duration of proceedings in Croatian courts, with particular emphasis on first-instance cases;*

*Transform the six-month deadline for the pre-investigation phase into a mandatory deadline subject to judicial oversight and reasoned extensions.*

Commission's 2025 assessment: N/A

Centre for Peace Studies' current assessment: In progress  
(initial steps)

## Gaps in the Commission's Report

### **Lack of procedural safeguards and effective remedies in migrant detention cases**

Lengthy procedures and arbitrary detentions persist in Croatia, particularly in cases involving push-backs and the ill-treatment of refugees and migrants. Cases frequently show detention without case-to-case assessment of all circumstances, including whether public order could be maintained through

11 Act on Amendments to the Courts Act, Official Gazette no. 136/2025, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025\\_11\\_136\\_2016.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025_11_136_2016.html).

less restrictive measures, as in High Administrative Court decision<sup>12</sup> Usž-3987/2024-2 of 22 January 2025,<sup>13</sup> demonstrating arbitrary detention without proper safeguards.

The Commission did not address the undermined equality before the law and the arbitrary detention of migrants. Numerous 2025 administrative court rulings<sup>14</sup> annulled detention orders because the case files failed to show that providing an interpreter in a language the third-country national understands was impossible, or that the foreign national consented to proceedings in English - a language the Court could not confirm they sufficiently understood - thereby violating the right to have proceedings conducted in a language the individual understands.

Judicial developments further confirmed systemic deficiencies in Croatia's treatment of migrants and asylum seekers. Most notably, in July 2025, the ECtHR delivered its judgment in *Y.K. v. Croatia*,<sup>15</sup> finding violations of Articles 3 and 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The Court held that Croatian authorities obstructed the applicant's access to asylum despite his repeated and clearly expressed intent to seek protection, communicated personally, through his lawyer, and in the presence of Ombudsperson representatives. Authorities denied him access to a lawyer, preventing him from challenging expulsion, and pressured him to consent to a so-called voluntary return. His removal exposed him to a risk of chain refoulement and treatment contrary to Article 3, as no assessment was made of his safety, access to asylum procedures, or risk of torture.

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12 Centre for Peace Studies, "The detention of Vladislav Arinichev was unlawful, ruled the High Administrative Court in Zagreb", CMS.hr, 11 March 2025, <https://www.cms.hr/detencija-vladislava-arinicheva-bila-je-nezakonita-presudio-je-visoki-upravni-sud-u-zagrebu/>.

13 Case no. Usž-3987/2024-2, High Administrative Court of the Republic of Croatia, judgment of 22 January 2025. <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=c3d3594d-66d4-488b-9ac7-ac2408fc9d4f&q=Us%c5%be-3987%2f2024-2>.

14 Cases before the Administrative Court in Zagreb: Us I-32/2025-2, judgment of 7 January 2025, <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=7b293d46-7a95-4137-8275-f3a50ae69665>; Us I-367/2025-2, judgment of 27 January 2025, <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=bf9fdb2-8ce8-49f7-8a38-d077c0bca99e&q=Us+I-367%2f2025-2>; Us I-1430/2025-2, judgment of 23 April 2025, <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=bb06f29b-e917-4851-b47b-3edcdacc2506&q=+Us+I-1430%2f2025-2>; Us I-1486/2025-3, judgment of 25 April 2025, <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=424a0b25-50d7-47f4-b8fd-bb7a0b020eb6&q=Us+I-1486%2f2025-3>; Us I-2059/2025-2, judgment of 2 June 2025 <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=424a0b25-50d7-47f4-b8fd-bb7a0b020eb6&q=Us+I-1486%2f2025-3>; Us I-2398/2025-2, judgment of 26 June 2025 <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=7ee953c8-af01-42e3-8697-2adce9ded955&q=Us+I-2398%2f2025-2>.

15 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), *Y.K. v. Croatia*, application No. 38776/21, 17 July 2025, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-244097%22%5D%7D>].

This ECtHR ruling against Croatia highlights broader concerns about judicial protection in expulsion and detention cases. The Court stressed that individuals who do not speak Croatian cannot effectively challenge expulsion without legal assistance and that remedies without automatic suspensive effect are ineffective. Reliance on constitutional complaints was considered insufficient, as they do not, in practice, prevent removal.

In 2025, administrative courts continued to annul detention orders for lacking individualised assessments and procedural safeguards, including interpretation in a language understood by detainees, demonstrating ongoing arbitrary detention, denial of remedies, and unequal treatment of migrants.

## **New Issues that Emerged in 2025**

### **Relativisation of unconstitutional extremist symbols and inconsistent judicial practice**

Concerning judicial practice, a pattern emerged in which courts acquitted individuals for chanting the slogan “*Za dom spremni*” (used by the Ustaša regime during the Nazi-puppet state NDH in Croatia),<sup>16</sup> thereby relativising a symbol that the Constitutional Court has repeatedly held to be unlawful and unconstitutional, as it violates Article 39 of the Constitution, which prohibits and penalises any call for or incitement to war or the use of violence, as well as national, racial or religious hatred or any form of intolerance. With regard to Ustaše symbols, the Constitutional Court, in its decision no. U-II-6111/2013 from 2017, expressly established that the “constitutional-law positions set out therein are not limited solely to the names of streets, settlements, symbols, and the like, but also represent general positions of the Constitutional Court on the character of the NDH as a negation of the fundamental values of the constitutional order of the Republic of Croatia”.<sup>17</sup> There is clear body of case law in Croatia that supports<sup>18</sup> the case for the illegality of this salute, along the lines that it

16 For example, a non-final decision of the Municipal Misdemeanour Court in Zagreb, presided over by Mirela Prstec Batarelo, acquitted N.K. (26) of the charges because on 4 July, during a live broadcast for HRT’s Dnevnik from the Hippodrome ahead of a Marko Perković Thompson concert, he appeared on camera shouting: ‘Za dom spremni’. See: Večernji list, Judge: “It is not the court’s role but that of politics to determine whether ‘ZDS’ is banned or not.” (Sutkinja: ‘Nije na sudu već na politici da utvrdi je li ZDS zabranjen ili ne’), 21 August 2025, <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/sutkinja-nije-na-sudu-vec-na-politici-da-utvrdi-je-li-zds-zabranjen-ili-ne-1885236>.

17 Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia, Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia Decision (Odluka Ustavnog suda Republike Hrvatske), U-II-6111/2013, 10 October 2017, Official Gazette Nr. 105/2017, para. 18, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017\\_10\\_105\\_2419.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017_10_105_2419.html).

18 The relevant case law is for example covered in the recent article: Marta Dragičević Prtenjača, The Dialogue Document in the Context of Contemporary Developments in the Republic of Croatia and the Use of Unconstitutional Symbols (Dokument dijaloga u svjetlu suvremenih zbivanja u Republici Hrvatskoj u kontekstu uporabe neustavnih obilježja), Zbornik Pravnog fakulteta u Zagrebu, Vol. 75 No. 5, 2025.

symbolises the official salute of the Nazi-puppet state called Independent State of Croatia,<sup>19</sup> and, as such, constitutes a manifestation of racist ideology, contempt for other people based on their religious and ethnic affiliation, and the trivialisation of the victims of crimes against humanity.

The public use of this salute, along with other Ustaša symbols and songs, increased significantly. This trend peaked around a large concert by a singer whose popular song includes “*Za dom spremni*” and who has openly supported the pro-fascist Ustaša regime, leading to previous bans in several European countries.<sup>20</sup> However, for this concert, the Prime Minister attended the general rehearsal, while several Ministers and numerous MPs attended the event where the salute was publicly performed. In the days that followed, the problematic nature of these symbols, particularly “*Za dom spremni*,” was downplayed in public discourse and portrayed as lawful when invoked in the context of the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995), despite the absence of any legal or case-law basis and notwithstanding repeated<sup>21</sup> Constitutional Court rulings deeming it unconstitutional. The salute was also repeated in the parliament by MPs, further contributing to its relativisation.

Despite the Constitutional Court ruling, lower courts began to legitimize the salute without statutory authority. The High Misdemeanor Court acquitted a former army general, notorious for his Hitler-style mustache, for publicly chanting it, relying on a political policy document without legal force.<sup>22</sup> The Misdemeanor Court acquitted another individual for chanting the salute during a live broadcast, invoking a non-existent legal exception in a decision still not final. The court argued that prosecuting the accused would entail prosecuting hundreds of thousands of concertgoers, including high-ranking officials, highlighting the political significance of their attendance. Ultimately, the

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19 The Independent State of Croatia (NDH) was a World War II-era puppet state of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, existing from 1941 to 1945, led by the Ustaše regime, and notorious for its fascist policies and widespread persecution of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and political opponents.

20 BBC, Croatian ultra-nationalist mega-gig exposes divided society, 18 August 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz60nyp3714o>.

21 Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia, Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia Decision (Odluka Ustavnog suda Republike Hrvatske), U-II-6111/2013, 10 October 2017, Official Gazette Nr. 105/2017, para. 18, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017\\_10\\_105\\_2419.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017_10_105_2419.html) ;Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia, Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia (Odluka Ustavnog suda Republike Hrvatske), U-III-1296/2016, 25 May 2016, <https://sljeme.usud.hr/usud/praksaw.nsf/fOdluka.xsp?action=open-Document&documentId=C12570D30061CE54C1257FC3002EF868>.

22 High Misdemeanor Court of the Republic of Croatia, Ppž-1247/2025-2, 12 March 2025, <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=fc2bf6ce-4696-4b87-940d-007eaa53a1d5&q=odavao+po%2c4%8dast+poginulim+suborci+ma%2c>

court held that whether the salute is prohibited is a political matter, rather than a judicial one.<sup>23</sup> In its 23 May 2025 decision, the High Misdemeanor Court acknowledged that this position results from the absence of a clear legal framework defining which totalitarian symbols constitute a public order disturbance.<sup>24</sup>

## **Implications and Recommendations for 2026**

In the context of the judiciary, omitting references to detention practices and pushbacks limits the assessment of how effectively courts protect fundamental rights in migration cases. These situations place individuals in vulnerable positions, requiring careful judicial scrutiny and effective remedies. Without addressing these issues, the Commission's report gives only a partial picture of the judiciary's role in reviewing executive decisions, identifying procedural shortcomings, and ensuring that courts can consistently uphold legal safeguards and equality before the law for migrants and asylum seekers.

The revitalisation of the symbols, as mentioned above, weakens legal certainty and undermines the authority of the Constitutional Court, as lower courts and political actors effectively legitimise symbols already found unconstitutional. It also risks normalising extremist and hate-inciting expressions in public life, eroding equality before the law and weakening the state's commitment to constitutional values.

**Suggested recommendation:** Ensure independent and effective investigations into alleged illegal and violent pushbacks, and end arbitrary detention imposed without considering less restrictive measures or the right to proceedings in a language understood by the individual.

**Suggested recommendation:** Implement the Ombudsperson's recommendation to promptly finalise and adopt a new Act on Misdemeanours against Public Order and Peace, ensuring clarity on the prohibition of unlawful symbols for politicians, military, etc. and the public alike.<sup>25</sup>

23 Zagreb Municipal Misdemeanor Court, Pp-8967/2025-3, 31 July 2025, <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=22ca972e-3485-4640-87cc-17b1fbb256a3&q=pravednom%2c+legitimnom%2c+obrambenom+i+oslobodila%c4%8dkom+Domovinskom+ratu>

24 High Misdemeanor Court of the Republic of Croatia, Ppž-1252/2022-2, 23 May 2025, <https://odluke.sudovi.hr/Document/View?id=d23e29e5-c8df-413d-8a78-d246e54b545a&q=Pp%c5%be-1252%2f2022>

25 Ombudsperson of the Republic of Croatia, Reaction of the Ombudswoman to recent instances of the use of Ustasha symbols ("Reakcija pučke pravobraniteljice na nedavne primjere korištenja ustaških simbola"), 6 August 2025, <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/reakcija-pu-ke-pravobraniteljice-na-nedavne-primjere-kori-tenja-usta-kih-simbola/>.

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## Implementation of Judgments

In 2025, delays in the implementation of the ECtHR judgments and their systemic follow-up continued to be a recurring and significant human rights concern, as Croatia still has a large number of ECtHR judgments pending implementation.<sup>26</sup> Even after the ECtHR rulings in *M.H. and Others v. Croatia*<sup>27</sup> and *Daraibou v. Croatia*,<sup>28</sup> which held Croatia responsible for failing to conduct effective investigations involving refugees and migrants, there is still little evidence of meaningful implementation.

Actions<sup>29</sup> criminal complaints involving pushbacks of refugees and other migrants involved unreasonably prolonged proceedings, often exceeding the six-month legal deadline for the pre-investigation phase to be concluded. Due diligence is lacking, therefore failing to meet the criteria of effective investigations under international and national law.

Furthermore, lengthy procedures and arbitrary detentions are still evident, especially in cases involving pushbacks and torture of refugees and migrants in Croatia. Access to legal remedies in these cases remains extremely difficult, and criminal procedures initiated in cases involving violence, theft, destruction of property, etc., seldom lead to an effective investigation in accordance with the criteria established by the ECtHR. Despite numerous allegations of violence against refugees and migrants over the past nine years, publicly available information indicates that only a single indictment<sup>30</sup> has been brought in connection with police violence at the Croatian borders. As of now, no individuals

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26 European Commission staff working document, Rule of Law Report 2025: Croatia, 52025SC0911, EUR-Lex, p. 16-17, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/AUTO/?uri=CELEX:52025SC0911>.

27 European Court of Human Rights, *M.H. and Others v. Croatia*, Applications nos. 15670/18 and 43115/18, judgment of 18 November 2021, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%22001-213213%22%7D>.

28 European Court of Human Rights, *Daraibou v. Croatia*, Application no. 84523/17, judgment of 17 January 2023, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%22001-222311%22%7D>.

29 Index.hr, “These police officers are being tried for beating a migrant. in 2020 – This is the first such case in Croatia,” Index.hr, 13 May 2020, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ovim-policajcima-sudi-se-zbog-premlacenog-migranta-2020-to-je-prvi-takav-slucaj-u-rh/2679302.aspx>: “The criminal proceedings were prolonged because the case file remained at the Karlovac Municipal Court for years, and the trial has only just begun. The media repeatedly requested an explanation from the Karlovac Municipal Court as to why the main hearing against the accused police officers was not being scheduled. The only response we received was that cases are being handled in the order in which they arrived at the court.”

30 Index.hr, “These police officers are being tried for beating a migrant in 2020 – This is the first such case in Croatia,” Index.hr, 13 May 2020, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ovim-policajcima-sudi-se-zbog-premlacenog-migranta-2020-to-je-prvi-takav-slucaj-u-rh/2679302.aspx>.

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responsible have faced criminal sanctions, no indictments, identifications, prosecutions, or sanctions against reported perpetrators have occurred.

Despite the ECtHR ruling in *M.H. and Others v. Croatia*, which found that Croatia violated the prohibition of torture by detaining children for over two months in Tovarnik, children continue to be held in prison-like facilities<sup>31</sup> with police presence, barred windows, and secured hallways. According to the Annual Police Activity Reports for 2023 and 2024,<sup>32</sup> the number of minors held in detention increased from 195 in 2023 to 252 in 2024.

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31 European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), AIDA Country Report — Croatia: 2024 Update, August 2025, [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/AIDA-HR\\_2024-Update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/AIDA-HR_2024-Update.pdf).

32 Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, Report on the Work of the Police in 2024, pp. 98–100, [https://www.sabor.hr/sites/default/files/uploads/sabor/2025-06-12/182601/IZVJ\\_RAD\\_POLICIJE\\_2024.pdf](https://www.sabor.hr/sites/default/files/uploads/sabor/2025-06-12/182601/IZVJ_RAD_POLICIJE_2024.pdf). and Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, Report on the Work of the Police in 2023, pp. 97–99, [https://www.sabor.hr/sites/default/files/uploads/sabor/2024-07-12/152102/IZVJ\\_POLICIJA\\_2023.pdf](https://www.sabor.hr/sites/default/files/uploads/sabor/2024-07-12/152102/IZVJ_POLICIJA_2023.pdf).

## ANTI-CORRUPTION FRAMEWORK -

### General assessment

Compared to the previous reporting period, Croatia has not made meaningful progress in strengthening its anti-corruption framework. While certain procedural or technical steps have been announced or partially initiated, these have not translated into tangible improvements in institutional independence, transparency, or accountability. In several key areas, developments during the period under review point to the entrenchment of systemic weaknesses rather than reform. The overall trajectory remains negative to stagnant, with warning signs identified in earlier Rule of Law Reports not adequately addressed:

Judicial and prosecutorial independence remains fragile, particularly in high-level corruption cases. Concerns regarding conflicts of interest and political influence in the leadership of the prosecution service persist and have not been mitigated through legal or institutional safeguards. For example, the government dismissed the Chief State Inspector Andrija Mikulić just several hours before he was arrested on the charges of corruption, which raised questions whether the Government was warned about the plans for arrest. The prime minister claimed he had no such information and that Mikulić was dismissed for other reasons.<sup>33</sup>

Legislative reforms essential to effective anti-corruption enforcement, notably revisions to the Criminal Procedure Code<sup>34</sup> and the Act on the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime (USKOK),<sup>35</sup> remain incomplete or ineffective in practice.

Transparency deficits persist, particularly in lobbying, state advertising and public procurement, despite the existence of formal legal frameworks.

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33 HRT, Plenković: We did not have any knowledge about the investigation, other reason for dismissal of Mikulić (Plenković: Nismo imali saznanja o istrazi, drugi razlog za smjenu Mikulića), 28 November 2025, <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/plenkovic-nismo-imali-saznanja-o-istrazi-mikulic-smijenjen-iz-drugih-razloga-12449388>,

34 Criminal Procedure Code (Zakon o kaznenom postupku), Official Gazette no. 152/08, 76/09, 80/11, 121/11, 91/12, 143/12, 56/13, 145/13, 152/14, 70/17, 126/19, 126/19, 130/20, 80/22, 36/24, 72/25, 13/2026, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2026\\_02\\_13\\_114.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2026_02_13_114.html).

35 Act on the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime (Zakon o Uredu za suzbijanje korupcije i organiziranog kriminaliteta), 76/09, 116/10, 145/10, 57/11, 136/12, 148/13, 70/17, 136/25, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025\\_11\\_136\\_2017.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025_11_136_2017.html).

High-profile corruption cases involving state-owned enterprises, public procurement and EU funds continue to emerge. In contrast, public confidence in accountability remains low due to limited visible outcomes and prolonged proceedings. For example, in July 2025, USKOK announced that it had completed its investigation and filed an indictment with the Zagreb County Court against former Health Minister Vili Beroš and seven co-defendants for corruption in the procurement of medical equipment.<sup>36</sup>

Without decisive corrective action, the current stagnation risks becoming structural and entrenched, undermining public trust and Croatia's ability to address high-level and complex corruption credibly.

### **Implementation of 2025 Commission recommendations**

**Recommendation: Take forward plans to revise the Criminal Procedure Code and the Law on the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime, in line with the Anti-Corruption Strategy, so as to further increase the efficiency of investigations and prosecution of corruption offences (first made in 2022)**

In 2025, the government maintained formal commitments to revising the Criminal Procedure Code and the Law on the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime (USKOK Law) in line with the Anti-Corruption Strategy, but only limited legislative action was completed.

In April 2025, Parliament adopted amendments to the Criminal Procedure Act.<sup>37</sup> These amendments introduced general procedural changes applicable across criminal proceedings, including adjustments to procedural deadlines and evidentiary rules. The amendments were not specifically designed to address corruption cases, nor did they introduce new mechanisms to strengthen prosecutorial independence, reduce discretionary power, or improve transparency in case allocation.

36 [Dnevnik.hr](https://dnevnik.hr), Indictment filed against Beroš, Petrač and the others: USKOK published what they are charged for (Podignuta optužnica protiv Beroša, Petrača i ostalih: USKOK objavio za što ih tereti), 16 July 2025, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/podignuta-optuznica-protiv-bivseg-ministra-vilija-berosa---924535.html>.

37 Amendments to the Criminal Procedure Act, Official Gezette No. 72/2025, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025\\_04\\_72\\_935.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025_04_72_935.html).

In November 2025, Parliament adopted amendments to the USKOK Law.<sup>38</sup> The adopted amendments were technical in nature, consisting primarily of textual and formal adjustments. They did not revise USKOK's mandate, internal governance, safeguards against conflicts of interest, or oversight arrangements.

Beyond these adopted amendments, no comprehensive revisions of either law were enacted in 2025 that would materially affect the efficiency of corruption investigations or prosecutions.

Despite legislative activity in 2025, key reform objectives of the Anti-Corruption Strategy were not translated into law.

The concentration of discretionary power within the prosecution service remained unchanged, as no legislative safeguards were introduced in 2025 to address conflicts of interest at senior prosecutorial level or to enhance internal accountability mechanisms.

Procedural inefficiencies in complex corruption cases persisted. The 2025 amendments to the Criminal Procedure Act<sup>39</sup> did not directly tackle long-standing issues such as lengthy pre-trial proceedings, evidentiary delays, or the handling of large-scale and high-profile corruption cases.

In addition, transparency and accountability gaps remained unaddressed. No legislative measures were adopted in 2025 to clarify or formalise criteria for jurisdictional decisions, including the allocation of cases involving EU funds or politically exposed persons.

While no formal rollback of anti-corruption legislation occurred in 2025, the continued absence of substantive reform reinforced previously identified weaknesses.

The adoption of procedural and technical amendments, without advancing structural changes repeatedly announced in earlier years, contributed to a pattern of delayed implementation. This sustained gap between strategic commitments and enacted legislation during 2025 strengthened perceptions that the legal framework governing corruption investigations remains structurally resistant to reform, particularly with regard to prosecutorial independence, efficiency, and transparency.

38 Amendments to the Law on the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime (USKOK Law), Official Gazette No. 136/2025, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025\\_11\\_136\\_2017.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025_11_136_2017.html).

39 Amendments to the Criminal Procedure Act, Official Gezette No. 72/2025, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025\\_04\\_72\\_935.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025_04_72_935.html).

The recommendation is relatively clear but it addresses several complex and interrelated problems (procedural efficiency, prosecutorial effectiveness, institutional design and safeguards) without clearly sequencing or prioritising the steps required to achieve these objectives. The Commission could improve the recommendation:

*Adopt targeted amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code and the Law on USKOK to introduce clear safeguards for prosecutorial independence and conflict-of-interest management, limit excessive discretionary powers in high-level corruption cases, and ensure transparent and accountable decision-making, including in cases involving EU financial interests.*

**Commission's 2025 assessment: Some progress    Centre for Peace Studies' current assessment: No progress**

## Gaps in the Commission's Report

### **Lack of safeguards for prosecutorial independence and jurisdictional discretion in high-level corruption cases**

The Commission did not issue a specific recommendation addressing the appointment, accountability, and conflict-of-interest safeguards applicable to the Chief State Attorney,<sup>40</sup> despite long-standing concerns regarding impartiality, political proximity, and the concentration of discretionary power in high-level corruption cases.<sup>41</sup>

40 The State Attorney's Office of the Republic of Croatia (DORH) takes legal action to protect the Constitution and legality before the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court, and represents the Republic of Croatia before higher courts and foreign courts, unless otherwise provided by law. DORH issues opinions on draft legislation and other regulations relevant to the organisation and work of the State Attorney's Office and the exercise of prosecutorial duties. It is authorised to file legal remedies, including extraordinary remedies, to protect the Constitution and the law under special legislation. DORH may also initiate proceedings before the Constitutional Court to review the constitutionality of laws or subordinate legislation, and before the High Administrative Court to review the legality of general acts, where it considers that the property rights and interests of the Republic of Croatia or the constitutional and legal status of the State Attorney's Office have been violated. More details here: <https://dorh.hr/hr/nadleznost-drzavnih-odvjetnistava>.

41 HRT, Messages that Turudić exchanged with Rimac published, many reactions (Objavljene poruke koje je Turudić razmjenjivao s Rimac, nižu se reakcije), 4 February 2024, <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/objavljene-poruke-koje-je-turudic-razmjenivao-s-rimac-nizu-se-reakcije-11336350>.

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In 2025, longstanding concerns about the investigation and prosecution of high-level corruption in Croatia remained evident in practice, with both structural rule-of-law issues and specific high-profile cases unfolding without meaningful systemic reform.

A persistent structural issue has been the jurisdictional power of the Chief State Attorney to decide whether complex cases fall under the national prosecution authority, USKOK, or the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO). Critics,<sup>42</sup> including the EPPO itself, have repeatedly argued that this framework undermines legal certainty and risks political influence in sensitive cases involving EU funds, because it allows discretionary national decisions rather than clear criteria under EU law.<sup>43</sup> Despite these critiques, no legislative change was introduced in 2025 to clarify or limit such discretionary decision-making.

Against this backdrop, several prominent corruption cases progressed in 2025: On 5 December 2025, the EPPO filed an indictment against 29 Croatian citizens and one company in a complex public procurement fraud case linked to the Faculty of Geodesy in Zagreb. The charges include abuse of office, corruption, illegal favouritism, forgery and money laundering in connection with nearly €6,000,000 in EU-funded contracts, of which 85% came from EU sources. The defendants include a former deputy minister at the Ministry of Culture and Media, a former dean, and a former professor, all accused of steering contracts to preferred companies.<sup>44</sup>

On 24 July 2025, the EPPO in Zagreb also indicted two former officials from the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs for abuse of position and authority involving fraudulent accommodation

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42 Gong, Gong's request adopted: European Commission will issue an opinion on the conflict of jurisdiction between the Croatian State Attorney's Office (DORH) and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) (Gongov zahtjev usvojen: Europska komisija očitovat će o sukobu nadležnosti između DORH-a i EPPO-a), <https://gong.hr/2025/03/25/gongov-zahtjev-usvojen-europska-komisija-ocitovat-ce-o-sukobu-nadleznosti-iz-medu-dorh-a-i-epo-a/>.

43 European Parliament Committee on Petitions, Petition No 1379/2024 on EPPO Regulation implementation: national law designates State Attorney General to decide jurisdiction, raising compliance issues under Article 25(6) of the EPPO Regulation, 12 June 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PETI-CM-774538\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PETI-CM-774538_EN.pdf); HRT The Voice of Croatia, Constitutional Court requests EU Court decision on jurisdiction of DORH and EPPO, 26 July 2025, <https://glashrvatske.hrt.hr/en/politics/constitutional-court-requests-eu-court-decision-on-jurisdiction-of-dorh-and-epo-12263703>.

44 Katja Miličić, EPPO indicts 29 in major public procurement fraud case, HRT The voice of Croatia, 5 December 2025, <https://glashrvatske.hrt.hr/en/domestic/epo-indicts-29-people-and-one-company-in-major-public-procurement-fraud-case-12460761>.

expenses tied to official travel. The scheme allegedly involved forged hotel invoices, submitted in support of travel reimbursements for projects co-financed by the Internal Security Fund (ISF).<sup>45</sup>

On 2 September 2025, a former Croatian Minister for Regional Development and EU Funds was sentenced by the County Court in Zagreb to seven months' imprisonment for abuse of office and authority for including personal restaurant expenses in EU programme procurement costs, resulting in unlawful gains of €973,235 that affected EU and national finances.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to EPPO cases, domestic corruption investigations also gained attention. For example, in late November 2025, the former Chief State Inspector, Andrija Mikulić, was arrested on suspicion of corruption related to illegal waste disposal and alleged quarry fraud, underscoring persistent vulnerabilities in public administration and oversight.<sup>47</sup>

Despite active prosecution and judicial action in these cases, the structural ambiguity in jurisdictional rules and the lack of reform throughout 2025 fueled concerns about fragmented investigations and uneven enforcement, particularly in politically sensitive or EU-related matters. Formal cooperation with EU authorities continued, but systemic safeguards to ensure clear, impartial allocation of competence were not strengthened during the reporting period.

## ***New Issues that Emerged in 2025***

### ***Weak implementation of the Lobbying Act***

The Lobbying Act entered into force on 1 October 2024, but its implementation has revealed structural weaknesses that significantly limit its effectiveness as a corruption-prevention tool.

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45 European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), Croatia: Former officials of Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs indicted over fraudulent accommodation expenses, 24 July 2025, <https://www.epo.europa.eu/en/media/news/croatia-former-officials-ministry-foreign-and-european-affairs-indicted-over-fraudulent>.

46 European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), Croatia: Former minister sentenced to seven months' imprisonment for abuse of office and authority, 2 September 2025, <https://www.epo.europa.eu/en/media/news/croatia-former-minister-sentenced-to-seven-months-imprisonment-abuse-office-and>.

47 Domagoj Ferencić, Chief State Inspector Andrija Mikulić arrested over corruption allegations, HRT The Voice of Croatia, 28 November 2025, <https://glashrvatske.hrt.hr/en/domestic/chief-state-inspector-andrija-mikulic-arrested-over-corruption-allegations-12449754>.

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In 2025, the first full year of implementation of the Lobbying Act,<sup>48</sup> which entered into force on 1 October 2024, exposed significant shortcomings that generated new corruption-related concerns on transparency and accountability in public decision-making. Although the Act formally introduced a Register of Lobbyists and reporting obligations, the analyses published in 2025 showed that the system provides only limited, retrospective transparency. Lobbyists are required to submit annual reports, but information on lobbying activities is not available in real time, and it cannot be scrutinised, whereas legislative or policy decisions are being prepared.<sup>49</sup>

A major issue identified during 2025 was the absence of disclosure obligations for public officials. Ministers, senior civil servants, and members of the parliament are not required to disclose meetings, communications, or correspondence with lobbyists. As highlighted by Gong, this creates a structural asymmetry: lobbyists are subject to registration requirements, while decision-makers are not obliged to provide reciprocal transparency. In practice, this prevents the public from knowing who influenced policy decisions, on what issues, and at what stage of the decision-making process.<sup>50</sup>

External assessments published in 2025 also indicated that these gaps weaken Croatia's overall integrity framework. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Public Integrity Indicators – Croatia Country Fact Sheet 2025 confirmed that while a lobbying register exists, public access to detailed, timely information on influence activities remains limited, and safeguards rely primarily on formal compliance rather than active oversight. The OECD emphasised that transparency mechanisms without real-time disclosure have reduced preventive impact and may fail to deter undue influence.<sup>51</sup>

In parallel, Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)'s follow-up assessment, based on developments up to and including 2025, identified outstanding deficiencies in Croatia's regulation of interactions between public officials and third parties. GRECO noted the continued lack of clear rules on the disclosure of meetings with lobbyists and external actors, as well as weaknesses in guidance and

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48 Lobbying Act, Official Gazette No. 36/2024, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2024\\_03\\_36\\_567.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2024_03_36_567.html).

49 Gong, Rule of law in Croatia: the EU echoes Plenković's perspective, 10 July 2025, <https://gong.hr/en/2025/07/10/rule-of-law-in-croatia-the-eu-echoes-plenkovics-perspective/>.

50 Gong, Rule of law in Croatia: the EU echoes Plenković's perspective, 10 July 2025, <https://gong.hr/en/2025/07/10/rule-of-law-in-croatia-the-eu-echoes-plenkovics-perspective/>.

51 OECD, Public Integrity Indicators: Croatia Country Fact Sheet 2025, 15 July 2025, <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-sub-issues/public-integrity/country-fact-sheets/OECD-Public-Integrity-Indicators-Croatia-Country-Fact-Sheet-2025.pdf>.

enforcement mechanisms. These shortcomings were highlighted as risks for conflicts of interest and improper influence, particularly in policy areas involving significant financial interests.<sup>52</sup>

No legislative amendments or implementing measures were adopted during 2025 to address these issues. As a result, concerns emerged that the new lobbying framework risks institutionalising delayed transparency, rather than strengthening integrity and public trust. This implementation-phase vulnerability represents a distinct corruption-related issue that became clearly visible only during 2025, once the Act began operating in practice.

On possible measures from the Commission's side: it is responsible for initiating conflict-of-interest proceedings and deciding whether an official's act or omission violates the Act; issuing opinions at the request of officials on the compliance of their conduct with public-office principles; prescribing asset-declaration forms and maintaining the register of officials; adopting implementing regulations and guidance; providing training on conflict-of-interest and asset-declaration obligations; cooperating with competent authorities, civil society, and international counterpart bodies; and performing other duties under the Act. If a violation is established, the Commission may impose the following sanctions: a warning, suspension of part of the official's net monthly salary, and publication of its decision at the official's expense.<sup>53</sup>

## **Implications and Recommendations for 2026**

The absence of a targeted recommendation weakens the credibility of the anti-corruption framework as a whole, undermines cooperation with EU institutions, and contributes to sustained public scepticism regarding the equal application of the law.

**Suggested recommendation:** Introduce clear and enforceable safeguards to ensure the independence and accountability of the Chief State Attorney, including transparent appointment procedures, strengthened conflict-of-interest rules, and limits on discretionary powers in high-level corruption cases.

52 Council of Europe Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), Fifth Evaluation Round: Follow-up Report on Croatia, 12 January 2026, <https://rm.coe.int/greco5-2025-18-final-eng-add-to-the-2nd-compliance-report-croatia-pu/48802a2fb1>.

53 Commission for Prevention of Conflicts of Interest, Powers (Nadležnosti), <https://www.sukobinteresa.hr/hr/nadleznosti>.

**Suggested recommendation:** Amend the Lobbying Act to introduce real-time publicly accessible disclosure of lobbying activities by both lobbyists and public officials, and strengthen the supervisory and enforcement powers of the Commission for the Prevention of Conflicts of Interest.

## MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND MEDIA FREEDOM -

### General assessment

Overall, no substantive progress was made in 2025 in strengthening the media environment and media freedom in Croatia. While a number of formal initiatives, preparatory steps, and policy discussions continued, they were not transformed into structural improvements or effective safeguards in practice, nor did they address long-standing concerns repeatedly identified in previous Rule of Law reports.

The trajectory observed in 2025 is best characterised by institutional stagnation combined with accumulating pressure on independent and critical journalism. Key recommendations related to the transparent allocation of state advertising and the effective protection of journalists against SLAPPs remain unimplemented, despite having been reiterated by the Commission over several consecutive years.

Clear early warning signs remain insufficiently addressed. These include the persistence of politically motivated pressure on critical and minority media (notably the significant funding cut to the ‘weekly Novosti’),<sup>54</sup> the rise in verbal and physical attacks against journalists, and the lack of effective accountability for perpetrators. The continued absence of early-dismissal mechanisms for abusive lawsuits and the failure to implement structural safeguards under the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) further reinforce the chilling effect on public-interest journalism.

At the same time, backsliding risks are becoming more entrenched due to the cumulative effect of legal uncertainty, weak enforcement, economic precarity of journalists (especially freelancers), and the politicisation of key regulatory and governance structures. The drop in Croatia’s ranking in international media freedom indices and the high level of news avoidance among the public underline the broader societal consequences of these trends.

Some limited signs of progress exist, notably in the area of transparency, such as the launch of the Media Ownership and Financing Platform<sup>55</sup> and continued awareness-raising activities related to journalist safety and anti-SLAPP measures. However, these developments remain fragmentary and

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54 Croatian Journalists’ Association, Editorial team of Novosti: Discriminatory decision of the Council for national minorities (Uredništvo tjednika Novosti: Diskriminatorna odluka Savjeta za nacionalne manjine), Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 23 April 2025, <https://hnd.hr/urednistvo-tjednika-novosti-diskriminatorna-odluka-savjeta-za-nacionalne-manjine/>.

55 Agencija za elektroničke medije, eMediji – Media Ownership and Financing Public Access Platform (‘eMediji AEM: Sustav javnog pristupa podacima o vlasništvu i načinu financiranja medija’), <https://emediji.aem.hr/Aem/Nias/Home/IndexPublic>.

largely procedural, and they have not yet resulted in measurable improvements in journalists' safety, independence, or media pluralism. To have a meaningful impact, such initiatives would need to be accompanied by binding legal reforms, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and genuine political commitment.

In sum, the situation in 2025 reflects continued non-implementation of key reforms rather than deterioration through new restrictive laws, justifying an assessment of no progress. Without urgent action to address entrenched structural weaknesses, there is a real risk that the existing problems will deepen and become increasingly difficult to reverse.

### ***Implementation of 2025 Commission recommendations***

**Recommendation: Step up efforts to strengthen the legal framework and oversight mechanisms to ensure a fair and transparent allocation of state advertising at national, regional and local level, including the public tender procedure (first made in 2022)**

In 2025, no substantive steps were taken by the Croatian authorities to strengthen the legal framework or oversight mechanisms governing the allocation of state advertising at national, regional, or local level.

No legislative amendments were introduced to clarify or tighten public tender procedures for state advertising, establish binding criteria for fair, non-discriminatory, and transparent allocation, and introduce effective oversight or sanctions for non-compliance by public bodies.

Existing rules on transparency of state advertising in Croatia derive from the Media Act,<sup>56</sup> the Electronic Media Act,<sup>57</sup> the Public Procurement Act,<sup>58</sup> and the Right of Access to Information Act,<sup>59</sup> as well as regulatory oversight related to the Fund for the Pluralism and Diversity of Electronic Media.<sup>60</sup> However, these rules remain fragmented and do not establish a unified or dedicated framework governing the allocation of state advertising at national, regional, and local levels.

Supervision is distributed among several bodies, including the Electronic Media Agency,<sup>61</sup> The State Commission for Supervision of Public Procurement Procedures,<sup>62</sup> the Povjerenik za informiranje,<sup>63</sup> and the State Audit Office.<sup>64</sup> None of these bodies has a comprehensive mandate to systematically oversee state advertising allocation across all levels of government.

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- 56 Zakon o medijima, NN 59/04, 84/11, 81/13, 114/22, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2004\\_05\\_59\\_1324.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2004_05_59_1324.html), obligation to publish data on media ownership and financing.
- 57 Zakon o elektroničkim medijima, NN 111/21, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2021\\_10\\_111\\_1942.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2021_10_111_1942.html), regulates the work of AEM and certain aspects of financing.
- 58 Zakon o javnoj nabavi, NN 120/16, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2016\\_12\\_120\\_2607.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2016_12_120_2607.html), applies when advertising exceeds public procurement thresholds.
- 59 Zakon o pravu na pristup informacijama, NN 25/13, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013\\_02\\_25\\_403.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013_02_25_403.html), obligation of public bodies to publish data on the spending of public funds.
- 60 Fond za pluralizam i raznovrsnost elektroničkih medija, <https://aem.hr/en/kategorija/fond-za-pluralizam/>, Ordinance on the Fund for Encouraging Pluralism and Diversity in Electronic Media (Pravilnik o Fondu za poticanje pluralizma i raznovrsnosti elektroničkih medija), NN 84/22, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2022\\_07\\_84\\_1279.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2022_07_84_1279.html).
- 61 Agencija za elektroničke medije (AEM), <https://aem.hr/>, supervision of electronic media and the Fund for Pluralism.
- 62 Državna komisija za kontrolu postupaka javne nabave (DKOM), <https://www.dkom.hr/en/about-us/1197>, public procurement supervision.
- 63 Povjerenik za informiranje, <https://pristupinfo.hr/?lang=en>, supervision of the implementation of the Act on the right to access to information.
- 64 Državni ured za reviziju, <https://www.revizija.hr/en>, audit of public spending.

As repeatedly noted in the European Commission's Rule of Law Reports (2023–2025 Croatia chapters),<sup>65</sup> The framework for fair and transparent allocation of state advertising continues to raise concerns, and no progress has been recorded in strengthening oversight mechanisms. In practice, enforceability remains weak, as there are no meaningful or automatic consequences for public authorities that fail to comply with transparency or allocation standards. Monitoring is therefore fragmented, and compliance largely depends on general transparency obligations and ex post audit mechanisms rather than proactive, centralised enforcement.

At the same time, structural risks associated with discretionary allocation of state advertising persisted, particularly at the local and regional level, where media outlets remain economically dependent on public funds. The Media Pluralism Monitor<sup>66</sup> identifies continued risks in the area of political independence and market plurality, noting that smaller and local media outlets are financially vulnerable and often reliant on public advertising and subsidies. In the absence of a unified regulatory framework and effective enforcement mechanisms, such dependency increases exposure to political influence. The repeated findings of the European Commission Rule of Law Reports (2023–2025)<sup>67</sup> further confirm that no progress has been made in strengthening safeguards to ensure fair and transparent allocation of state advertising.

No obstacles to implementation were publicly identified by the government, suggesting that the lack of progress reflects a lack of political will rather than technical or legal constraints. There were also no indications of preparatory steps, consultations, or pilot measures that could be considered initial progress. Overall, 2025 represents a continuation of inaction, despite the problem's long-standing, repeatedly acknowledged nature.

The recommendation is relatively clear in identifying the problem, namely the continued use of SLAPPs targeting journalists, and it appropriately refers to both substantive law (defamation provisions) and procedural safeguards (early dismissal of groundless cases).

65 European Commission, Rule of Law Report 2025, Country Chapter on Croatia, p. 13, [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/920cc4c5-ceef-4072-9d5c-95ef1bba1f78\\_en?filename=15\\_1\\_63948\\_coun\\_chap\\_croatia\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/920cc4c5-ceef-4072-9d5c-95ef1bba1f78_en?filename=15_1_63948_coun_chap_croatia_en.pdf).

66 Paško Bilić, Antonija Petričušić, Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era Application Of The Media Pluralism Monitor In The European Member States And Candidate Countries In 2023, Country report: Croatia, Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, June 2024, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/bf79602f-7477-5b93-8ffd-3729d4319af2/content>,

67 European Commission, Rule of Law Report 2025, Country Chapter on Croatia, p. 13, [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/920cc4c5-ceef-4072-9d5c-95ef1bba1f78\\_en?filename=15\\_1\\_63948\\_coun\\_chap\\_croatia\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/920cc4c5-ceef-4072-9d5c-95ef1bba1f78_en?filename=15_1_63948_coun_chap_croatia_en.pdf).

However, the recommendation remains overly broad and insufficiently operational, as it does not specify concrete legislative actions, minimum standards, timelines, or responsible authorities. In particular, it does not clarify what constitutes ‘adequate’ progress in reviewing defamation laws or in ensuring the effective use of procedural rules to dismiss abusive litigation.

As with other long-standing media-related recommendations, the absence of binding benchmarks or consequences for non-implementation significantly weakens its impact. In practice, this allows the state to demonstrate compliance through awareness-raising activities alone, without delivering the structural legal changes necessary to protect journalists effectively. A revised recommendation should require Croatia to:

*Adopt binding legislation establishing clear, objective, and enforceable criteria for the allocation of state advertising at national, regional, and local levels, including mandatory public tender procedures, independent oversight, and effective sanctions for non-compliance, within a defined timeframe.*

In addition, the Commission could improve the recommendation in the following way:

*Provide access to EU funding, particularly cohesion and recovery funds, according to compliance with the recommendation in order to ensure that long-standing non-implementation has tangible consequences.*

**Commission’s 2025 assessment: No progress    Centre for Peace Studies’ current assessment: No progress**

**Recommendation: Continue efforts to address the issue of strategic lawsuits against public participation targeted at journalists, including by reviewing the legal provisions on defamation and encouraging wider use of procedural rules that allow dismissing groundless lawsuits, taking into account the European standards on the protection of journalists (first made in 2022)**

In 2025, efforts to address SLAPPs in Croatia continued primarily at the level of awareness-raising, coordination, and preparatory work, rather than through substantive legal reform.

Activities undertaken during the year included the continued operation of expert and inter-institutional working groups, dissemination of educational materials and guidance on SLAPPs, and training sessions and seminars aimed at journalists, legal practitioners, and judicial actors.

These measures contributed to greater awareness of SLAPPs as a phenomenon and to a shared understanding of European standards among relevant stakeholders. In this sense, progress in 2025 can be characterised as procedural and preparatory, consistent with the Commission’s description of ‘ongoing work’.

However, no legislative amendments were adopted in 2025 to reform criminal or civil defamation provisions in line with European standards, introduce effective early-dismissal mechanisms for manifestly unfounded cases, and shift litigation costs or provide compensation in a way that would deter abusive lawsuits.

As a result, journalists continued to face hundreds of pending defamation cases, lengthy proceedings, and significant financial and psychological pressure. According to the Croatian Journalism Association,<sup>68</sup> the number of active lawsuits against journalists and media outlets in Croatia remains close to seven hundred, with defamation claims constituting the majority of cases. Monitoring by journalist associations and international organisations confirms that SLAPPs remain a systemic problem with a clear chilling effect on investigative and public-interest journalism.

The key obstacles to implementation in 2025 were not technical or legal in nature, but rather reflected a lack of political will to translate awareness into binding reform. There were no signs of regression through the adoption of more restrictive laws; however, the persistence of criminal defamation and the absence of procedural safeguards indicate structural stagnation rather than meaningful progress.

Overall, while 2025 saw continued discussion and capacity-building, the core elements of the recommendation remain unfulfilled, and journalists’ exposure to abusive litigation has not been substantially reduced.

The recommendation is relatively clear in identifying the problem, namely the continued use of SLAPPs targeting journalists, and it appropriately refers to both substantive law (defamation provisions) and procedural safeguards (early dismissal of groundless cases).

However, the recommendation remains overly broad and insufficiently operational, as it does not specify concrete legislative actions, minimum standards, timelines, or responsible authorities. In particular, it does not clarify what constitutes ‘adequate’ progress in reviewing defamation laws or in ensuring the effective use of procedural rules to dismiss abusive litigation.

68 Croatian Journalists’ Association, At least 696 lawsuits worth 3.1 million euros are active, Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 1 May 2025, <https://hnd.hr/hnd-aktivno-najmanje-696-tuzbi-teskih-3-1-milijun-eura/>.

**The implementation of the recommendation is in progress, initial steps have been taken, but these steps remain largely procedural and non-binding.**

As with other long-standing media-related recommendations, the absence of binding benchmarks or consequences for non-implementation significantly weakens its impact. In practice, this allows the state to demonstrate compliance through awareness-raising activities alone, without delivering the structural legal changes necessary to protect journalists effectively.

Therefore, the Commission should consider elevating persistent non-implementation of anti-SLAPP safeguards to a higher level of EU response, including conditionality mechanisms, where repeated recommendations have failed to produce substantive change. To improve the implementation of the recommendation the Commission could:

*Adopt, within a defined timeframe, binding legislative reforms to effectively prevent and remedy SLAPPs, including the introduction of early dismissal mechanisms, cost-shifting and compensation measures for abusive litigation, and the alignment of defamation laws with European standards on freedom of expression and ensure that failure to implement these safeguards has tangible consequences.*

**Commission's 2025 assessment: No progress**

**Centre for Peace Studies' current assessment:  
In progress (initial steps)**

## **Gaps in the Commission's Report**

### **Political interference in public funding of critical and minority media**

While the 2025 Rule of Law Report acknowledges general concerns about media freedom and pluralism, it fails to address concrete cases of politically motivated financial pressure on media outlets, most notably the significant reduction of public funding for the Serbian minority's 'weekly Novosti'.

In 2025, 'Novosti' faced a 35% funding cut by the Council for National Minorities,<sup>69</sup> despite the Council's overall budget increasing. This decision followed sustained public and political pressure by the members of the ruling coalition, in particular the far-right Homeland Movement (Domovinski

<sup>69</sup> Ivica Buljan, Editorial team of Novosti: Discriminatory decision of the Council for national minorities (Uredništvo tjednika Novosti: Diskriminatorna odluka Savjeta za nacionalne manjine), Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 23 April 2025, <https://hnd.hr/urednistvo-tjednika-novosti-diskriminatorna-odluka-savjeta-za-nacionalne-manjine/>

pokret), which openly called to defund the outlet due to its critical editorial stance.<sup>70</sup> This constitutes a clear example of political interference through financial leverage, with direct implications for editorial independence and protection of minority media. International media freedom organisations, including the European Federation of Journalists and the Media Freedom Rapid Response consortium, publicly condemned<sup>71</sup> the funding cut and addressed an open letter to the prime minister, warning that the decision represented unlawful political pressure and a serious threat to media freedom. Despite the seriousness of these developments, the Commission did not issue a targeted recommendation addressing political interference via public funding decisions, nor did it link this case to broader structural risks related to state advertising, subsidies, and discretionary funding mechanisms.

Throughout 2025, political rhetoric delegitimising critical journalism intensified, while institutional responses remained weak or absent. The funding cut to ‘Novosti’ was not reversed, nor were safeguards introduced to prevent similar actions in the future. This occurred alongside an increase in verbal and physical attacks against journalists, continued legal harassment through SLAPPs, and delays in implementing structural reforms under the EMFA.

Taken together, these developments point to a pattern of tolerated or indirectly endorsed pressure on critical and minority media, rather than isolated incidents.

## ***New Issues that Emerged in 2025***

### ***Weak safeguards for media independence***

In 2025, there has been clear, politically motivated pressure and defunding directed towards those most critical of the Government, namely the Serbian minority’s ‘weekly Novosti’. ‘Novosti’ faced a drastic 35% funding cut by the Croatian public body, the Council for National Minorities, despite that body’s overall budget increasing,<sup>72</sup> and this was clearly linked to the demands of the new far-right

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70 Croatian Radio Television, Open: Who is responsible for divisions in society and hate of speech? (Otvoreno: Tko je odgovoran za podjele u društvu i govor mržnje?), 10 November 2025, <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/otvoreno-792-12421503>.

71 Media Freedom Rapid Response, Open letter to Croatian Prime Minister Plenković: MFRR raises alarm over unlawful political pressure against weekly Novosti, <https://www.mfr.eu/open-letter-to-croatian-prime-minister-plenkovic-mfr-raises-alarm-over-unlawful-political-pressure-against-weekly-novosti/>.

72 Ivica Buljan, Editorial team of Novosti: Discriminatory decision of the Council for national minorities (Uredništvo tjednika Novosti: Diskriminatorna odluka Savjeta za nacionalne manjine), Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 23 April 2025, <https://hnd.hr/urednistvo-tjednika-novosti-diskriminatorna-odluka-savjeta-za-nacionalne-manjine/>.

ruling coalition partner, Domovinski pokret (Homeland movement).<sup>73</sup> International media freedom bodies (the European Federation of Journalists and Media Freedom Rapid Response) publicly condemned this as unlawful political pressure and a threat to editorial independence,<sup>74</sup> even issuing an open letter to the prime minister Plenković demanding action to protect minority media.<sup>75</sup> There has been an increasingly hostile environment towards some journalists in 2025, with a sense of silent approval from the ruling coalition leading to 27 documented cases of assaults, threats, and pressures towards journalists.<sup>76</sup> Direct political pressure was clear throughout 2025, with politicians and party representatives making public statements or campaign rhetoric that delegitimised critical reporting or specific journalists. Besides, systemic pressure is growing through slow or inadequate institutional responses to threats, creating a climate where verbal intimidation goes unchecked. Croatia failed to implement structural reforms that should have accompanied the EMFA. The government opted for a Law on the EMFA implementation which is considered insufficient by the Croatian Journalists Association, Trade Union of Croatian Journalists and media professionals and the opposition parties with the main critique oriented to the failure to ensure “full independence of regulatory bodies” from political influence, stating that the new law does not address the issue of political influence over the appointment of directors and governing bodies of public media service providers”.<sup>77</sup>

Reporters Without Borders within its World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) show that Croatia fell sharply in relation to 2024 - from 48th to 60th place stating as the key weak point the following: “While the media landscape is diverse and dynamic, the government has failed to protect journalists

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73 Croatian Radio Television, Open: Who is responsible for divisions in society and hate of speech? (Otvoreno: Tko je odgovoran za podjele u društvu i govor mržnje?), 10 November 2025, <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/otvoreno-792-12421503>

74 European Federation of Journalists, Croatia Weekly Novosti faces drastic funding cuts amid political pressure, 7 May 2025, <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2025/05/07/croatia-weekly-novosti-faces-drastic-funding-cuts-amid-political-pressure/>.

75 European Federation of Journalists, Open letter to Croatian Prime Minister Plenković over unlawful political pressure against weekly Novosti, 5 December 2025, <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2025/12/05/open-letter-to-croatian-prime-minister-plenkovic-over-unlawful-political-pressure-against-weekly-novosti/>.

76 Croatian Journalists' Association, Safe Journalists in Croatia: Attacks and Political Pressure on Journalists, Alarming Trendy in the Region (‘Safe Journalists u Hrvatskoj: Napadi i politički pritisci na novinare, u regiji alarmantni trendovi’), Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 10 December 2025, <https://hnd.hr/safe-journalists-u-hrvatskoj-napadi-i-politicki-pritisci-na-novinare-u-regiji-alarmantni-trendovi/>.

77 Croatian Journalists' Association, Media in 2025 Marked by the Media Freedom Act, Press Subsidies, and the Vjesnik Fire (Medije u 2025. obilježio Akt o slobodi medija, subvencije tisku i požar Vjesnika), Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 31 December 2025, <https://hnd.hr/medije-u-2025-obiljezio-akt-o-slobodi-medija-subvencije-tisku-i-pozar-vjesnika/>.

against strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and attacks by organised crime, and has exerted pressure on the media”.<sup>78</sup> The report emphasises the fact that the reporter’s profession in Croatia is potentially hazardous, especially for those working on investigating corruption, organised crime, or war crimes, with journalists at local levels especially vulnerable to harassment. The Croatian Journalists’ Association reports 27 cases of assaults, threats, and pressures on journalists in 2025.<sup>79</sup> SLAPPs continue to chill journalism. Although Croatia has taken initial steps towards implementing the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive, effective mechanisms for early dismissal of abusive lawsuits are not yet in place, and journalists remain exposed to lengthy, costly litigation. The Draft Proposal of the Act on the Protection of Persons Engaged in Public Participation is currently undergoing public consultation through the e-Consultation platform.<sup>80</sup> The Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation has indicated that the proposed legislation goes beyond the minimum standards set out in Directive (EU) 2024/1069. In particular, it foresees that the law will apply to all civil and commercial court proceedings initiated against natural and legal persons engaged in public participation, irrespective of whether the case has cross-border implications.<sup>81</sup> Some awareness raising activities from national bodies have also been incited, such as the Educational brochure for early recognition and dismissal of SLAPP lawsuits created by the Agency for Electronic Media.<sup>82</sup>

Media Pluralism Monitor 2025<sup>83</sup> gives Croatia a medium-high risk score, stating “The Croatian media landscape faces significant legal, economic, and digital challenges, impacting media freedom, editorial independence, and public access to reliable information”. Progress has been made in transparency, particularly through the launch of the publicly accessible Media Ownership and Financing

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78 Reporters Without Borders, Croatia – World Press Freedom Index and Media Freedom Profile, <https://rsf.org/en/country/croatia>.

79 Croatian Journalists’ Association, Safe Journalists in Croatia: Attacks and Political Pressure on Journalists, Alarmingly Trendy in the Region (‘Safe Journalists u Hrvatskoj: Napadi i politički pritisci na novinare, u regiji alarmantni trendovi’), Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 10 December 2025, <https://hnd.hr/safe-journalists-u-hrvatskoj-napadi-i-politicki-pritisci-na-novinare-u-regiji-alarmantni-trendovi/>.

80 Public consultation on the Regulatory Impact Assessment Statement Form for the Draft Law on the Protection of Persons Involved in Public Activities, e-Savjetovanja, <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/ECon/MainScreen?entityId=32523>.

81 Draft ‘Anti-SLAPP’ law in public consultation (U javnom savjetovanju nacrt ‘Anti-SLAPP’ zakona), Informator.hr, 23 February 2026, <https://informator.hr/vijesti/u-javnom-savjetovanju-nacrt-anti-slapp-zakona>.

82 Council of Europe, Campaign for the Safety of Journalists: National chapters Newsroom, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/-/educational-brochure-for-early-recognition-and-dismissal-of-slapp-lawsuits?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/-/educational-brochure-for-early-recognition-and-dismissal-of-slapp-lawsuits?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

83 Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, MPM Interactive Results (Media Pluralism Monitor Interactive Results), <https://cmpf.eui.eu/mpm-interactive-results/>.

Platform,<sup>84</sup> which improves public access to information on media ownership structures, sources of financing, and regulatory sanctions.

The August 8 deadline for implementing the EMFA was not reached. Many national actors, including the Croatian Journalists' Association and opposition parties, are raising concerns that the EMFA implies much-needed structural reforms, but in reality, only smaller interventions are planned.<sup>85</sup> A Law on EMFA implementation was drafted and is currently under discussion in the Parliament.<sup>86</sup> Opposition political parties state that there is no political will to fully implement the EMFA, while research and experts also highlight different problematic aspects of the proposed law. Paško Bilić, the head of the Croatian team for the Media Pluralism Monitor project since 2015, identified the absence of a broad public debate, in particular the insufficient involvement of the expert community, as the main problem in the implementation of the EMFA within the Croatian legal system while Melisa Skender, Secretary General of the Croatian Journalists Association (HND), emphasised that HND<sup>87</sup> has been opposed from the outset to the adoption of the law implementing the EMFA, as none of the identified structural risks affecting journalism and the media have been addressed.<sup>88</sup>

84 Agencija za elektroničke medije, eMediji – Media Ownership and Financing Public Access Platform ('eMediji AEM: Sustav javnog pristupa podacima o vlasništvu i načinu financiranja medija'), <https://emediji.aem.hr/Aem/Nias/Home/IndexPublic>.

85 Croatian Journalists' Association, Why the European Media Freedom Act is important, Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 20 January 2026, <https://hnd.hr/zasto-je-europski-zakon-o-slobodi-medija-vazan/>.

86 Croatian Parliament, Report of the Committee on Information, Informatization and Media on the Draft Law on the Implementation of Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 on the establishment of a common framework for media services in the internal market and amending Directive 2010/13/EU (European Media Freedom Act), first reading, P.Z.E. No. 228, <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/radna-tijela/odbori-i-povjerenstva/izvjesce-odbora-za-informiranje-informatizaciju-i-medije-o-130>; Report of the Committee on Legislation on the Draft Law on the Implementation of Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 on establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market and amending Directive 2010/13/EU (European Media Freedom Act), P.Z.E. No. 228, <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/radna-tijela/odbori-i-povjerenstva/izvjesce-odbora-za-zakonodavstvo-o-prijedlogu-zakona-o-2779>; video recording and the voting results are available here: <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/sjednice-sabora/prijedlog-zakona-o-provedbi-uredbe-eu-2024/1083-o-uspostavi-zajednickog-okvira-za>.

87 Croatian Journalists' Association, Why the European Media Freedom Act is Important ('Zašto je Europski zakon o slobodi medija važan'), Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 20 January 2026 <https://hnd.hr/zasto-je-europski-zakon-o-slobodi-medija-vazan/>.

88 Hina, Roundtable Discussion: The Media Freedom Act in Croatia is on Hold ('Okrugli stol: „Akt o slobodi medija u Hrvatskoj je na čekanju”'), Jutarnji list, 20 January 2026, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/okrugli-stol-mozemo-akt-o-slobodi-medija-u-hrvatskoj-je-na-cekanju-15663641>

Overall, significant structural challenges persist. Media ownership concentration remains high, transparency of ownership information remains fragmented across multiple registers, and safeguards to ensure the fair and transparent allocation of state advertising remain insufficient. While formal licensing procedures are public, concerns remain regarding the transparency of decision-making criteria and the perceived independence of regulatory bodies.

### **Implications and Recommendations for 2026**

In 2025, several developments emerged that together constitute a qualitative escalation of risks to media freedom rather than a mere continuation of previously identified challenges. Most notably, politically motivated financial pressure on critical and minority media, combined with the failure to implement the EMFA, marked a new phase in the erosion of safeguards for independent journalism in Croatia.<sup>89</sup>

These developments were accompanied by a deterioration in the safety environment for journalists, increased tolerance of hostile rhetoric by political actors, and a persistent gap between formal commitments and structural reform.

The absence of the Commission's recommendation on this issue risks normalising political interference through financial instruments, weakening protection for minority and critical media voices, undermining the credibility of existing recommendations on state advertising and media pluralism, and sending a signal that selective financial pressure falls below the threshold of EU concern, despite its severe impact on media freedom. This omission also reduces the preventive function of the Rule of Law mechanism, as it fails to address early warning signs of systemic backsliding before more overt forms of interference occur.

The Commission should have issued a specific recommendation addressing political pressure exerted by members of the ruling coalition, particularly representatives of the Homeland Movement party (Domovinski pokret), and financial interference in the media sector, particularly through the allocation and withdrawal of public funding and subsidies, including funding for minority and critical media.

**Suggested recommendation:** Adopt and implement binding safeguards to prevent political interference in the financing, governance, and regulation of media, including minority and

89 Croatian Journalists' Association, *Media in 2025 Marked by the Media Freedom Act, Press Subsidies, and the Vjesnik Fire* ('Medije u 2025. obilježio Akt o slobodi medija, subvencije tisku i požar Vjesnika'), Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo, 31 December 2025, <https://hnd.hr/medije-u-2025-obiljezio-akt-o-slobodi-medija-subvencije-tisku-i-pozar-vjesnika/>.

non-profit media, and ensure the full and effective implementation of the EMFA. This should include transparent and objective criteria for public funding decisions, independent appointment procedures for regulatory and public media bodies, and effective remedies against politically motivated interference.

**Suggested recommendation:** Given the cumulative nature of the risks identified, the Commission should also closely monitor compliance and consider stronger follow-up mechanisms where repeated failures to implement media freedom safeguards persist.

## CHECKS AND BALANCES -

### General assessment

We continue to see no progress in this area. Independent institutions, such as the Ombudswoman, are sidelined. The Ombudswoman and specialised ombudspersons' annual reports are discussed in the Parliament with a two to three-year delay. Some institutions do not deliver information upon the Ombudswoman's requests, and the prime minister made remarks diminishing the role of that institution.<sup>90</sup> Civic space continues to be narrowed. Civil society organisations, especially those that deal with advocacy, have difficulties in accessing funding. Participation in decision-making processes is limited, as the comments and suggestions of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other actors are rarely taken into account in public consultations. Consultations are often shorter than 30 days. Laws are often enacted under an urgent procedure, including the Agricultural Land Consolidation Act, which raised the concerns of the public and landowners about potential interference with property rights. Amendments to the Social Welfare Act were also adopted urgently, despite regulating fundamental social rights of often vulnerable groups and having long-term effects, without objective urgency. Even the Act on Public Holidays and Non-Working Days was passed through a fast-track procedure.<sup>91</sup> During the year, there were cases of smear campaigns against progressive civil society organisations and/or organisations working in the field of independent culture by various actors. In the second half of 2025, there were several cases of attacks or campaigns for banning cultural festivals and other public events organised by national minorities or other actors. St. Mark's Square, Zagreb, where the Government resides, is still largely closed to the public and protests.

### Implementation of 2025 Commission recommendations

There were no recommendations in this area in the *Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report*.

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90 N1 Info, Plenković: 'As Prime Minister, to listen to the Ombudswoman? She is there thanks to me' ('Plenković: Pravobraniteljicu da ja slušam? Kao premijer? Ona je tamo zahvaljujući meni'), N1, 7 July 2025, <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-pravobraniteljicu-da-ja-slusam-kao-premijer-ona-je-tamo-zahvaljujuci-meni/>

91 Gong, Croatia still effectively in a state of emergency: In 2025, one-fifth of laws were passed through urgent procedures (Hrvatska i dalje kao u izvanrednom stanju: U 2025. po hitnom postupku donesena petina zakona), <https://gong.hr/2026/01/14/hrvatska-i-dalje-kao-u-izvanrednom-stanju-u-2025-po-hitnom-postupku-donesena-petina-zakona/>.

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## Gaps in the Commission's Report

### Information requests of the Ombudsperson

In the 2025 Rule of Law Report, the European Commission assessed that ‘significant progress on further improving the follow-up to recommendations and ensuring a more systematic response to information requests of the Ombudsperson’. The Commission cited the data given by the Ombudsperson that around 61% of all recommendations given in 2023 have either been already implemented or are in the process of being implemented, as compared to 44% of those issued in 2022, which were implemented in that year.<sup>92</sup> Although this is progress, we believe that this cannot be considered a sufficient reason to omit the recommendation altogether, but that the Commission should have repeated the recommendation and continued following the trend for several consecutive years. When it comes to ensuring a more systematic response to information requests of the Ombudsperson, in her 2024 annual report, the Ombudsperson stated that several ministries failed to respond to their inquiries on some instances, such as the Ministry of Health and Ministry of the Interior, while the Ministry of Physical Planning, Construction and State Assets, the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, and the Croatian Institute for Social Work only responded after reminders.<sup>93</sup> The recommendation about the Ombudsperson is significant, especially considering the fact that the Ombudsperson’s Annual Report for 2022 was only discussed in the Croatian Parliament in June 2025, while the reports for 2023 and 2024 have still not been discussed, which undermines the impact of these reports. The Ombudsperson stated that “such an approach by the Croatian Parliament and the Government of the Republic of Croatia represents an attempt to marginalise and silence this independent institution”.<sup>94</sup> She proposed that the Rules of Procedure of the Croatian Parliament stipulate that reports of the Ombudsperson, as well as those of other independent institutions, must be discussed in the year in which they are submitted. She also questioned whether the opinion of the Government is necessary at all for a report of an independent institution submitted to the Croatian Parliament. If it is deemed necessary, she proposed setting a deadline within which the Government

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92 Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia, Ombudswoman Report 2024 (‘Izvješće Pučke pravobraniteljice 2024’), <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/download/izvjesce-pucke-pravobraniteljice-za-2024-godinu/?wpdm-dl=21926&refresh=69721dd1beb381769086417>.

93 Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia, Ombudswoman Report 2024 (‘Izvješće Pučke pravobraniteljice 2024’), <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/download/izvjesce-pucke-pravobraniteljice-za-2024-godinu/?wpdm-dl=21926&refresh=69721dd1beb381769086417>.

94 Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia, The Rules of Procedure of the Croatian Parliament Must Ensure Timely Debate on Reports by Independent Institutions (‘Poslovníkom Sabora potrebno osigurati da se izvješća neovisnih institucija raspravljaju na vrijeme’), 13 June 2025, <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/poslovníkom-sabora-potrebno-osigurati-da-se-izvje-a-neovisnih-institucija-raspravljaju-na-vrijeme/>.

must submit its opinion to the Parliament, so that the absence of the Government's opinion would not prevent parliamentary debate and so that the debate could be held in the year in which the report is submitted. When asked about this by the press, the Prime Minister asked, "What kind of topic that is" and later asked, "who cares".<sup>95</sup> Also, in July 2025, after a public critique by the Ombudsperson about how the institutions handled hate speech and relativisation of the crimes of the Ustaša regime, the prime minister Andrej Plenković said to the press that he doesn't have to listen to what the Ombudsperson has to say and that "we choose her. She is there thanks to me."<sup>96</sup>

While the Commission cites the relevant reports showing that civic space is considered narrowed in Croatia, and mentions that the National Plan for Creating an Enabling Environment remains under preparation, it fails to emphasise that the previous Strategy expired in 2016<sup>97</sup> and that the Plan has been 'under preparation' for multiple years without a clear reason why. Also, the Commission fails to address other issues related to civic space, such as limitations to protest in front of the government and Parliament building, attacks, harassment, and SLAPPs against civil society organisations, limited access of CSOs to participation in decision-making processes and public consultations, etc. At the same time, CSOs in Croatia, especially advocacy organisations, are literally shrinking, cutting their staff, activities, and programs, due to decreased opportunities for financing.

The process of enacting laws continued to have the same issues as in the previous years. During the first half of 2025 (1 January – 15 July), 68 new laws were adopted, out of which 21 were adopted in an urgent procedure, and 47 were adopted through regular procedure.<sup>98</sup> It is unclear why so many new laws are brought under an urgent procedure. Also, public consultations on the relevant legislative and public policy documents are still pro forma and not substantive. The CSOs are discouraged from

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95 L.G., Plenković to a journalist: 'What kind of topic is that? Who cares?'; Ombudswoman: 'That's a message to citizens' ('Plenković na pitanje novinara: 'Kakva je to tema? Koga briga?'; Pravobraniteljica: 'To je poruka građanima'), Jutarnji list, 4 April 2025, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/plenkovic-na-pitanje-novinara-kakva-je-to-tema-koga-briga-pravobraniteljica-to-je-poruka-gradanima-15570225/>.

96 N1 Info, Plenković: 'As Prime Minister, to listen to the Ombudswoman? She is there thanks to me' ('Plenković: Pravobraniteljicu da ja slušam? Kao premijer? Ona je tamo zahvaljujući meni'), N1, 7 July 2025, <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-pravobraniteljicu-da-ja-slusam-kao-premijer-ona-je-tamo-zahvaljujuci-meni/>.

97 National Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society from 2012 to 2016. (Nacionalna strategija stvaranja poticajnog okruženja za razvoj civilnoga društva od 2012. do 2016. godine), <https://udruga.gov.hr/istaknute-teme/nacionalni-plan-stvaranja-poticajnog-okruzenja-za-razvoj-civilnoga-drustva/nacionalna-strategija-stvaranja-poticajnog-okruzenja-za-razvoj-civilnoga-drustva-od-2012-do-2016-godine/280>.

98 Croatian Parliament, Overview of Work of the Croatian Parliament in the 11th Legislature ('Pregled rada Hrvatskoga sabora u 11. sazivu'), 18 July 2025, <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/press/javnost-rada/arhiva/pregled-rada-hrvatskoga-sabora-u-11-sazivu-0/>.

participating in the consultations by the fact that their comments and suggestions are rarely accepted. According to the Annual Report on the Implementation of Public Consultations for 2024, 896 consultations were conducted through the e-consultations portal, in which 4,787 persons or legal entities participated, which is also a decrease compared with 2023.<sup>99</sup> 13,766 comments were received, 1,477 comments were accepted, 1,272 partially accepted, 5,288 were not accepted, 4,143 were noted, and 1,586 comments were not answered. Other than the fact that a large portion of comments are not accepted or are just noted, the issue is also that the reports on the implementation of consultations were not published in some cases, even though this is a legal obligation of the bodies responsible for e-consultations under the article 11 of the Act on the Right of Access to Information. Further, despite the provisions of the Act on the Right of Access to Information<sup>100</sup> and the Act on Better Regulation Instruments,<sup>101</sup> which prescribes a standard 30-day public consultation period and the obligation to publish consultation plans intended to ensure compliance with that timeframe, a large number of state administration bodies and state authorities continue to conduct consultations within significantly shorter periods, citing the urgency of addressing issues or adopting acts. So, only 84 (nine %) of consultations lasted for 30 or more days, which means that as much as 91% of the consultations did not meet the legal requirements on consultation duration.<sup>102</sup>

## **New Issues that Emerged in 2025**

No new issues have emerged in 2025.

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99 Government of the Republic of Croatia, Legislation Office, Annual Report on the Implementation of Public Consultations in the Legislative and Regulatory Drafting Procedures for the Year 2024 ('Godišnje izvješće o provedbi savjetovanja s javnošću u postupcima donošenja zakona i drugih propisa za 2024. godinu'), <https://zakonodavstvo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages//dokumenti//Godi%C5%A1nje%20izvje%C5%A1%C4%87e%20o%20provedbi%20savjetovanja%202024.pdf>.

100 Act on the Right of Access to Information, (Zakon o pravu na pristup informacijama), Official Gazette No. 25/13 and 85/15, <https://www.pristupinfo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ZPPI-neslužbeni-procisceni-tekst.pdf>.

101 Act on Better Regulation Instruments (Zakon o instrumentima politike boljih propisa), Official gazette No. 155/2023, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2023\\_12\\_155\\_2360.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2023_12_155_2360.html).

102 Government of the Republic of Croatia, Legislation Office, Annual Report on the Implementation of Public Consultations in the Legislative and Regulatory Drafting Procedures for the Year 2024 ('Godišnje izvješće o provedbi savjetovanja s javnošću u postupcima donošenja zakona i drugih propisa za 2024. godinu'), <https://zakonodavstvo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages//dokumenti//Godi%C5%A1nje%20izvje%C5%A1%C4%87e%20o%20provedbi%20savjetovanja%202024.pdf>.

## ***Implications and Recommendations for 2026***

**Suggested recommendation:** Develop a systematic approach to implementing the recommendations of the Ombudsperson and other institutions. Rules of Procedure of the Croatian Parliament have to be amended to stipulate that the reports of the Ombudsperson, as well as those of other independent institutions, must be discussed in the year in which they are submitted.

**Suggested recommendation:** Adopt the National Plan for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development in 2026, after transparent and open consultations with the public, especially civil society organisations.

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## CONTACTS

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Centre for Peace Studies (CPS) is a civil society organisation that protects human rights and strives for social change based on the values of democracy, anti-fascism, nonviolence, peacemaking, solidarity, and equality. It uses activism, education, research, advocacy, and direct support. We work with communities, initiatives, organisations, media, institutions, and individuals in Croatia and internationally. The vision of CPS is a society of solidarity, openness, and nonviolence, where institutions enable peace, social security, political and economic equality, and freedom for all people. Members of society actively participate in decision-making, managing public goods, and developing their communities, all while maintaining a balance with the environment. We operate through four complementary programs: Education and Empowerment for Social Change, Protection and Promotion of the Right to Asylum and Migration, Supporting Inclusive Society, and Affirmation of Economic and Social Rights.

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### **The Civil Liberties Union for Europe**

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a non-governmental organisation promoting the civil liberties of everyone in the European Union. We are headquartered in Berlin and have a presence in Brussels. Liberties is built on a network of 24 national civil liberties NGOs from across the EU.

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