

Social Rights Monitor 2025 - Country Report - Croatia



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About SOLIDAR

SOLIDAR is a European network of progressive Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working to advance social justice through a just transition in Europe and worldwide. We represent over 50 member organisations based in 26 countries (19 of which are EU countries), among which national CSOs in Europe, as well as some non-EU and EU-wide organisations, working in one or more of our fields of activity.

The network is brought together by its shared values of solidarity, equality and participation.

SOLIDAR voices the concerns of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions by carrying out advocacy actions, project management and coordination, policy monitoring and awareness-raising across its different policy areas.

What is the Social Rights Monitor (SRM)?

The Social Rights Monitor assesses the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) at national level from a civil society perspective. The EPSR – also known as the Social Pillar – is a set of 20 principles that guide the action of the European Union in the realm of social affairs and policies. In other words, it is intended to be a compass guiding the EU towards a more social Europe. For too many people, however, the implementation of these principles at national and EU level is not yet a reality.

Thanks to the contribution of our members and their networks on the ground (the National Strategy Groups), SOLIDAR monitors the extent to which social rights are respected, upheld and promoted for all people living in the EU. The Social Rights Monitor also investigates the health of civic space and social and civil dialogue in the EU, as well as the extent to which a just transition is being pursued. Therefore, the thematic areas covered by the Monitor are the following: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market; Fair working conditions; Social inclusion and protection; a Just transition; and Civic space. The first three correspond to the three chapters of the EPSR, while the last two have been added to give a fuller picture of social justice in Europe.

Thanks to first-hand data gathered by national civil society organisations, the Social Rights Monitor constitutes a direct channel of policy recommendations between the national level and EU policymakers. It thus amplifies the voices and needs of the most marginalised groups. The Monitor dedicates a section to “advocacy messages” which result from the national-level analyses in each thematic area and are addressed to EU policymakers.

Countries are assigned a score for each thematic area out of a maximum of 100 points. This makes immediately visible how each country is performing in each area and enables comparison with other countries. The numerical scores originate from the National Strategy Groups’ (NSGs) assessments of national developments related to social rights, civic space and just transition. Negative developments in an area result in lower scores. NSGs rate these developments for each country by replying to Linkert-scale questions. This means that the score of a country’s thematic area is given by adding up all the rates given to the questions concerning that thematic area and expressing the score out of 100. The overall score of a country is the average of the thematic areas scores. Further details on the questionnaire and data gathering are provided in the section “About: What is the process?”

Since the SRM score reflects the NSG’s assessment of changes—either improvements or deteriorations—in each of the five areas over the past 12 months, it does not represent the overall status of these dimensions in absolute terms. Instead, it highlights recent trends. For example, a country with a historically strong welfare state might receive a low score if recent reforms have significantly weakened social rights or pose a risk of doing so. This does not imply that the overall situation is poor, but rather that recent developments are cause for concern and may undermine social standards over time.

Therefore, the SRM should not be used to compare the overall situation of social rights across countries—official statistics are more appropriate for that purpose. Instead, it serves as a tool to track short-term national trends and to understand the perspectives of civil society organizations (CSOs) on these developments.

What is the process?

The Social Rights Monitor is a tool that amplifies the voice of progressive civil society at national level. Its content is based on the inputs provided by the National Strategy Groups (NSGs) set up by SOLIDAR’s members and partners, which are active in the countries analysed. They consist of NGOs, associations, movements, trade unions, academia and thinktanks, ensuring that the perspective of civil society is mirrored in the Social Rights Monitor’s analysis. The Monitor reflects the experiences of these organisations, which are active on the ground, and the experiences are complemented by scientific data gathered through desk research.

The data elaborated in the Social Rights Monitor are gathered by SOLIDAR’s secretariat through a questionnaire distributed to the National Strategy Group Leaders (our national members) and completed with information produced by each group. From 2023, this questionnaire has been carried out online.

Based on the picture that emerges from the Monitor, SOLIDAR and the NSGs together devise policy recommendations for EU policymakers. These aim to make social rights, a healthy planet and an enabling, free, protected civic space a reality for all in Europe. The key recommendations stemming from the analysis are used as a basis for SOLIDAR's social affairs advocacy work.

The SRM is published every year, around the end of November/beginning of December and its findings cover the period going from June of the previous year to May of the year of the publication. This timeline is due to the fact that the NSGs submit their questionnaire by the end of May of the publication year.

How do we use it?

SOLIDAR's main role as a European-level civil society network is as a bridge between EU institutions and their policies on the one hand and our progressive members working at the national level on the other. The Social Rights Monitor is a valuable tool to gather information from the ground and bring it to policymakers' attention. This ensures that the voices of the most neglected social groups are duly taken into account. For example, the SRM complements the European Semester, by providing a more-complete assessment of Member State policies. Regrettably, the Semester is still too focused on countries' economic and financial performances and does not provide sufficient guidance on upward social convergence in the European Union.

SOLIDAR disseminates the findings of the Social Rights Monitor in various ways, including through the Social Europe Conference, an annual event at which it is presented, and which also explores a topic of priority for social Europe. More generally, the Monitor is one of the main ways through which the SOLIDAR network presents its positions on social affairs, so its findings are mainstreamed throughout our advocacy work.

Social Rights Monitor Overview

SCORE: 48

Several issues persist in Croatia, the NSG reports. Migration policy is challenged by the lack of a comprehensive inclusion framework and issues related to the work permit process, both of which form major obstacles to the successful integration and inclusion of foreign workers. Wages increased in nominal terms, but this was insufficient to overcome the impact of inflation for the lowest wage group. As a result, the poverty rate continued to rise, particularly among the unemployed and elderly. The National Housing Plan is in theory a positive development but falls short in several ways. A socially just green transition is hampered by the country's reliance on fossil fuels and a political unwillingness to move away from these. Several restrictions on civil dialogue have been introduced, both symbolic and concrete. However, the NSG does note some important legislative achievements, including in labour law and social protection. Amendments to the Aliens Act improve the labour situation of migrant workers in several respects. Amendments to the Social Welfare Act have raised the calculation rates for Guaranteed Minimum Benefit (GMB) beneficiaries and introduced several improvements to childcare.

The NSG for Croatia was led by SOLIDAR's member [Center for Peace Studies](#).



Equal Opportunities and Access to the Labour Market

SCORE: 61

Inclusion of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and minorities

There is a serious and persistent lack of effective inclusion policies for foreign workers, migrants and asylum seekers, the NSG reports. Croatia has a shortage of workers, and foreign workers are increasingly arriving to fill the open positions. In 2024, a total of 206,529 residence and work permits were issued, nearly 20% more than in 2023. This growth trend continued in 2025, and more than 72,000 permits were issued in just the first two months. There has been a continued increase in the number of migrants coming from distant countries, such as Nepal, India, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan and Egypt.

In its State Report to the Council, the Croatian government highlighted several campaigns and initiatives that are supposed to show increased societal openness and a commitment to anti-discrimination values.^[1] Independent research carried out by the Centre for Peace Studies (CPS) and based on public polling data contradicts these claims. Instead, the research shows deep-seated and widespread prejudice in Croatian society towards migrants, national minorities and other vulnerable groups.^[2] Furthermore, this data shows that formal policy efforts have not been able significantly to improve underlying social attitudes.

Although public discourse has heavily featured the topic of migrants, Croatia does not have a migration nor an integration policy. This policy vacuum is especially harmful for asylum seekers, who face various degrees of negative prejudice depending on their ethnicity.^[3] This is especially true for Arab and Muslim people, who make up a significant portion of asylum seekers. Polling data also shows that over a third of respondents expressed cultural and security-related fears over Russians. In contrast, the data shows that Ukrainian asylum seekers, who benefit from temporary protection, are broadly accepted. In general, only 34% of respondents expressed support for asylum seekers and 21% believed that national minorities pose a threat to Croatian society. Furthermore, strong sentiments about minorities "abusing the system" or receiving "preferential" treatment are commonplace and reinforced by both media and political discourse. This has dire consequences for these disadvantaged groups, as Roma, Serb and Muslim people face high degrees of social exclusion and stigmatization. Sexual orientation and identity have also been grounds for discrimination. As a result, LGBTQI+ people are stigmatized and more likely to be socially excluded. But the government has not adopted a comprehensive strategy to combat social division and to promote multiculturalism and inclusion. Discriminatory attitudes are not systematically monitored, nor is the effectiveness of measures aimed at promoting tolerance. The amendments to the Aliens Act in 2024 did not include a comprehensive immigration policy. Moreover, the Ombudswoman reports not receiving information on the

implementation of the National Migration Plan, as was foreseen in the Demographic Revitalization Strategy. This strategy on the one hand encourages Croatians to stay in the country by aiming to create a supportive environment for families and young people, and on the other focuses on return migration and the ties with the Croatian diaspora. [4] The Action Plans for Combating Discrimination and for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights were meant to cover both 2024 and 2025. Yet, they were only submitted for public consultation at the end of 2024 and entered into force in February 2025. The draft of the Action Plan for the Integration of Persons Granted International Protection was not submitted for public consultation until early 2025, so a new drafting procedure had to be initiated. [5]

The lack of a comprehensive framework also perpetuates the language barrier, which remains one of the biggest hurdles for the integration of foreign workers, asylum seekers and refugees. It greatly hinders their exercise of economic and social rights as well as their access to housing, employment, healthcare, and education. Proper communication with health professionals is difficult due to linguistic barriers, which form a substantial obstacle to the provision of adequate health. This is problematic from several perspectives. It increases the likelihood of relevant both medical history and treatment being lost in translation. And it can also lead medical services to be denied due to lack of adequate linguistic support. The NSG points out that these issues are very problematic. From a privacy and data protection, the need for interpreters increases the chances of leaks of sensitive patient data, notably when it is the employers that act as interpreters, who sometimes abuse this role and use confidential information to terminate the workers' contracts. And from a workers' rights perspective, language barriers increase the burden on medical staff. Establishing an electronic database for the languages most commonly spoken by third-country could help address some of these issues, ensuring that only certified interpreters are employed to carry out this important function. Such a database would be open to various public bodies and institutions at state, regional and local level. This solution could be piloted within the framework of the SINERGY project, which is co-financed by the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and implemented by the Office for Human Rights and the Rights of National Minorities (ULJPPNM). This office aims to cooperation at various levels in implementing international and national integration standards for third-country nationals in Croatia. One of the achievements of the project and the Office is the establishment of the Advisory Group of third-country nationals and people of migrant origin, which has as one of its goals ensuring that their perspective is taken into account for integration policy (improvements) at all levels of levels of decision-making. [6]

Furthermore, in addition to the challenges they face because of the language barrier, foreign workers face discrimination when trying to access the health insurance system. They are considered the health insurance holders for their children, substantially increasing the cost of their insurance policies, especially in the case of households with multiple children. Unemployed people under international protection also face difficulties, as they do not receive a personal insurance identification number (MBO). This greatly hinders their administrative processing and also means they are not recognized as mandatory insured persons, preventing access to the highest level of protection, even though they are entitled to the same public healthcare as insured persons. [7] Without this mandatory insurance, they need to cover co-payments and additional charges, increasing their healthcare costs, and general practitioners often refuse them as patients, due to the administrative burden associated with their status. Moreover, without an MBO, unemployed persons under international protection have no access to digital services linked to the healthcare system, such as appointment services and the digital submission of reimbursement requests. Children under international protection are in a particularly precarious situation, as paediatricians often refuse to treat them for similar reasons, but they do not have a way to obtain MBOs, as they are under international protection.

Refugee children also face difficulties in accessing education. If they have not finished elementary school, 15 to 18-year-olds are directed to adult education instead of high school. However, adult education is unsuitable for these children and is more expensive than normal high school education.

Foreign workers often rely on apps to translate their Croatian employment contracts. This can be problematic, as they might not have a clear understanding of their rights and obligations. Moreover, foreign workers often live in inadequate and collective accommodation, especially when housing is provided by their employer. The public reception centres for asylum seekers have been reported as inadequate because of severe hygienic issues such as cockroaches, bedbugs and irregular distribution of basic supplies. A positive development in this field is amendments to the Aliens Act, which regulates housing conditions for migrant workers. [8] Another positive initiative is the Welcome Center of the City of Zagreb, which opened in 2024 and acts as a one-stop-shop to provide information and support for inclusion in society. The centre's mission is to tackle the social exclusion and isolation of these groups.

Despite the pressing and urgent issues caused by the language barrier, access to Croatian language courses is still difficult, and the competent ministry has not yet fulfilled its legal obligation to implement a solution. The Croatian Employment Service (HZZ) office provides access to basic Croatian language courses for people under temporary protection and foreign workers. Migrant workers in sectors like construction, tourism and hospitality, manufacturing, and the food industry were also granted access to vouchers for language learning programmes through the amendments to the Aliens Act. However, the Ombudswoman Report highlights concerns over the accessibility of these programmes. The Ombudswoman report is an annual report on fundamental rights in Croatia that is submitted to the Parliament. [9] These concerns relate to geographical distance, the times at which the programmes are organized and the English-Croatian base model, which excludes people who don't speak English. [10] Furthermore, persons under international protection cannot access the basic Croatian language courses offered through the HZZ voucher system.

The UN Human Rights Committee welcomed the 2021–2027 National Plan for the Inclusion of Roma but expressed concern over the persistent discrimination and marginalization of the group. The committee recommended additional measures to improve the access of Roma to education, employment, housing and healthcare. The Ombudswoman Report and NGOs have continued to point out the de facto segregation of Roma children in primary schools: They attend either fully segregated or significantly overrepresented classes. In the 2024-2025 school year, there were 85 such classes with likely over 1,000 children, according to Ministry of Science and Education data^[11]. Some scholarship programmes for Roma children exist, such as the City of Zagreb's, which awarded 108 scholarships for the 2022-2023 school year. In addition, 54 Roma students qualified for Ministry of Science and Education scholarships for higher education. Other programmes include the Support Program for the Education and Upbringing of Members of the Roma National Minority, which provides student dormitory spaces for 11 students. The Special Enrollment of the Zagreb School of Health Sciences reserves a spot for a student of Roma origin.

Quality work permits (for third-country nationals)

There have been some positive developments in the labour status of foreign workers in Croatia, the NSG reports. Yet major issues persist in the work permit application process, the associated rights granted to migrant workers and other workers' rights. Migrant workers continue to face violations of labour rights such as the following: working without a residence and work permit, non-payment of wages and partial payment in cash, illegal overtime, denial of the right to rest, failure to report work-related injuries, lack of employment contracts, and unlawful dismissal and harassment by employers. Most of these violations, however, are not reported because of fear of dismissal and deportation. The NSG remains uncertain as to whether the amendments to the Aliens Act will increase respect for migrant workers' rights and the reporting of violations.

Nevertheless, several amendments to the Aliens Act that seek to protect both foreign and domestic workers from wage dumping came into force in 2025 and had a positive impact on the situation of migrant workers.^[12] The conditions of employer-provided accommodation were regulated to combat the inadequate housing that is often prevalent. Sufficient monitoring is needed to prevent a continuation of exploitative housing conditions.

The limit for extending work and residence permits was increased from one to three years. Migrant workers are now also permitted a period of 60 days unemployment to find a new employer, and the process for changing employers while a permit is valid has been simplified.^[13] These are important improvements over the earlier situation, when both work and residence permits were tied to concrete job offers, so the loss of a job automatically meant the loss of these permits. But challenges persist. Only about a quarter of permits were renewed. Furthermore, in-country applications and transitions between statuses are restricted, and migrants often only obtain a decision over a change in status too late – that is, after they have returned to their country of origin or have been expelled. Data from the Ministry of Interior showed that 257 third-country nationals who had previously been issued residence and work permits were denied entry in 2024.^[14] Of these, 250 followed the revocation of residence and work permits at the request of employers and without the workers being informed.

The amendments also introduced several non-discrimination provisions. Among these, employment contracts may not contain terms that would place third-country nationals in a less favourable position than other workers. Similarly, their salaries may not be lower than those of other workers in the same, similar or related occupations. However, major issues persist in employers' transparency and accountability during the work permit application process. The employer is responsible for the application for and extension of a work permit through the digital system, but the migrant worker has no means to verify the submission. This may lead to migrant workers working under an illegal status without being aware of this, something that can severely hinder them in regularizing their situation and obtaining social security rights. The Centre for Peace Studies (CPS) submitted a proposal for an amendment to the Aliens Act in 2024, which would grant migrant workers the right to see the status of the application procedure and other work- and residence-related documents on the e-Citizens platform.^[15] However, the CPS amendment was not included in the 2025 Aliens Act amendments. The only official response provided by the Ministry of the Interior was that "further digitalization will be considered, depending on technical and other conditions". However, the CPS amendment would not require any additional digitalization, as migrant workers already have access to the e-Citizen platform.

Additional challenges migrant workers face in the exercise and protection of their rights include severely restricted access to justice. Free legal aid is only available to those migrants whose home country offers the same protections to Croatian citizens.^[16] The short durations of migrant workers' stays further limit the usefulness, effectiveness and swiftness of complaint mechanisms. Family reunification is also difficult to realise, as the Aliens Act requires the migrant worker to hold temporary residence continuously for at least one year.^[17] The amendments to the Aliens Act did introduce an exception for minor children, who can be reunified with a parent holding a work permit before the one-year period.^[18] Nevertheless, as family reunification is linked to income thresholds and permit types, low-salary workers can hardly access this right. Pathways to long-term residence and integration are difficult to navigate and the criteria are stringent. The law requires permanent residence for five years, but this eligibility period is very prone to resets due to gaps in legal status. The absence of robust inclusion programmes on access to education, healthcare and community services contributes to migrant workers' difficulties. Many foreign workers also face issues in the accumulation of pension rights. While EU social security coordination law and bilateral agreements govern the pension rights of most "Western", Balkan and European migrants, a lot of Asian and African migrants are in a precarious situation due to a lack of bilateral agreements. (Exceptions include

North Macedonia, Turkey and South Korea.) As such, these migrants contribute monthly to the pension system but will not receive pension payments.



Fair Working Conditions

SCORE: 47

Adequate wages

Salaries in Croatia generally increased from 2024. In the first trimester of 2025, the average monthly salary increased by 9.2% in nominal terms to €1 448 and rose 5.8% in real terms. However, 40% of workers in Croatia, mainly in the manufacturing sector, received a salary below €1 070 in 2024.^[19] Eurostat data shows that the median equivalised net income in Croatia, which indicates annual income adjusted for different household types, amounted to €12 344 in 2024, while the mean was €13 411. These figures are significantly below the EU median of €21 651 and mean of €24 556.^[20]

Inflation significantly affected the real value of wages in Croatia. The Harmonized Index of Consumer Prices increased by 4.3% in March 2025, but the impact on many essential aspects of life was harder. Food and non-alcoholic beverages prices increased by 5.1%; housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels by 4.9%; health costs by 5.4%; and education by 5.4%.^[21] In response, the government introduced price caps for 30 foodstuffs in September 2024 and added 40 more in February 2025, when it also adopted the Law on Exceptional Price Control Measures. This law requires retailers to provide unhindered access to digital tools that allow real-time comparison of prices, so that customers can monitor price changes.^[22]

The NSG reports that the around 95,000 minimum wage earners in Croatia are facing heightened financial pressure, because of inflation among other factors.^[23] In recent years, the government has set the minimum wage on its own initiative, without involving social partners. Unions point out that, despite the increase in the minimum wage, wages in a large number of companies have not risen. Consequently, the wage difference between qualified and unqualified workers is decreasing, possibly leading to an outflow of qualified workers. Furthermore, Eurostat reports that the in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate increased by 2.2 percentage points to 8.4% in 2024.^[24]



Social Inclusion and Protection

SCORE: 43

Housing

Housing prices in 2024 continued to increase significantly in Croatia, both for renting and for purchasing. Prices rose by over 10% compared to 2023, and even between the third and fourth quarters of 2024 they increased by 1.4%.^[25] This increase makes access

to housing significantly more difficult for economically disadvantaged social groups, as pensions and social benefits have not been increased in line with prices.

Croatia's first National Housing Policy Plan, adopted in March 2025,[26] is in theory a step in the right direction but features several flaws in its drafting and design, the NSG reports. The main goal of the plan is to provide citizens with affordable housing that meets certain standards of adequacy. However, the plan also serves more transversal goals. These include reducing emigration; providing housing for young people; increasing access to housing for groups like the elderly and workers in deficit occupations; and ensuring green, circular and sustainable housing.

The NSG highlights that CSOs were unable to participate in the drafting process in a meaningful and substantial way. Though the plan claims to have involved CSOs in the drafting, these contributions actually came from local government associations. Genuine CSOs were not included in the working group for the plan, and some organized independent initiatives to foster public debate.[27]

A second problem highlighted by the NSG was the plan's poorly defined scope. Rather than defining "affordable housing", it stated that the plan applied to "the category of members/(citizens) who are between the poverty risk threshold and the average salary", clearly and intentionally excluding people living below the poverty threshold. . People with an above-average wage are also excluded, despite possibly being excluded by other circumstances from access to affordable housing. Marginalized groups like the Roma and the homeless are also excluded, as are. However, the Act on Amendments to the Foreigners Act addressed foreign workers' housing situation for the first [28]. This Act provides that the accommodation provided to the foreign worker by an employer must meet certain living, health and safety standards. It also states that rent may not be too high in relation to the net salary of the foreign worker and the quality of the accommodation.

The third problem of the housing policy plan is the lack of an accompanying social housing plan. As mentioned, those under the poverty-risk threshold and the homeless are excluded from the plan, so they rely on social housing policies. However, official statistics on the homeless in Croatia were found to be inaccurate and to underestimate severely the number of homeless people. Whilst official data only counted 803 homeless, CSOs estimate there are at least 2 000 and possibly 5 000.[29] According to the NSG, the main reason for the difference is that the government data only counts two types of homeless people: those with a registered residence at the Institute for Social Work and those who received a referral for overnight accommodation from the Institute. However, many homeless people do not and cannot use these forms of overnight accommodation because spaces are limited. Many large cities in Croatia do not provide shelters or overnight accommodation, despite an obligation to do so.[30] The Ombudswoman's Report shows that 11 out of 22 cities do not have any type of temporary accommodation for homeless people. The situation in eastern Croatia is especially dire, as only the city of Osijek provides a single shelter.[31]

Facilities for the homeless only offer a place to sleep, not a permanent residence. Other more permanent solutions, like social welfare homes or foster families, have long waiting lists.[32] As such, many homeless people do not have a registered residence. This prevents them from exercising their rights under the social and healthcare systems, which require an ID card and a registered residence. In addition, while a large number of users of services intended for the homeless do have a residence, that residence is often inadequate, the NSG points out. The network also highlights the growing number of homeless people who are unable to work – similar to the trends for elderly people, people with mental health problems and people struggling with addictions. These increases point to major shortcomings in Croatia's social welfare safety net. A comprehensive answer to these challenges is needed, such as a national plan to combat homelessness to complement the National Housing Policy Plan. Such a national plan is indicated by the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, but it is not a specific strategy for homelessness. Rather, it consists of a broader anti-poverty strategy, which indicates the fight against homelessness as a priority but does not include concrete actions and milestones to address the issue.

Good practice:

Pula is the first city in Croatia to develop social housing for the homeless through the "housing first" approach, which places the homeless person at its centre.[33] It prioritizes immediate access to permanent housing, complemented by individualized support services like employment assistance, access to healthcare and community reintegration. It carries no preconditions of sobriety, employment or participation in rehabilitation programmes. The project thus seeks to help reduce the social barriers homeless people face and to provide them with stable housing while they overcome these hurdles.

Poverty eradication

The NSG reports that poverty affects a substantial number of Croatian citizens. The at-risk-of-poverty-and-social-exclusion rate rose to 20.3% in 2024, an increase of 1 percentage point compared to 2023, while the EU rate decreased over the same period.[34] In addition, the NSG reports significant regional disparities in the at-risk-of-poverty rate and in the number of people at risk of poverty. At one end of the spectrum, the capital of Zagreb has a comparatively low at-risk-of-poverty rate of 9.7%. At the other end, the Panonska Hrvatska region has a high at-risk-of-poverty rate of 29.7%.

Several social groups have heightened at-risk-of-poverty rates. The rate for single-person households is particularly high at 51.8%. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for families with three or more children increased by 3 percentage points to 23.5%.[35] The rate for the

unemployed is 40.5%.^[36] remaining extremely high despite a fall of 4.7 percentage-points since 2023. The NSG points to Croatia's very low coverage rate of unemployment benefits as the cause of this high rate. Data from the Croatian Employment Service shows that the coverage rate was 23.5% in April of 2025, among the lowest in Europe.^[37] The main reason is restrictive entitlement conditions. In addition, public expenditure on unemployment only amounts to 1.7% of social protection expenditure, less than half the EU average of 3.9%.^[38] The European Commission stated in its Country Report on Croatia in the European Semester framework that unemployment benefits do not provide an adequate safety net for workers.^[39] The report further points out that the self-employed and fixed-term contract workers have low take-up rates. Only minor legislative changes were introduced to the entitlement conditions as a consequence of the report, such as the reduction of the prior work requirement from nine to six months for workers under 30 and a 5-percentage-point increase of the benefit from the 91st to the 180th day of unemployment.^[40] These changes do not substantially affect entitlement conditions and thus do not contribute to reducing the risk of poverty among unemployed people.

A third social group at high risk of poverty is the elderly, whose at-risk-of-poverty rate rose 2.2 percentage points to 37% in 2024. The percentages are higher for some groups with specific social characteristics.^[41] The rate for men is 32.7% and that for women is 40.1%, showing a significant gender gap. The rate for elderly people who live alone is 61.4%. Two types of benefits are available to the elderly. A residual system of national elderly benefits is available to those over 65 who do not benefit from a pension, and the amount of this is changed only once a year, in January. Around 18 000 elderly people receive this benefit. It was increased to €154.50 in January 2025, but this is still insufficient to cover living expenses. The second system is the public pension scheme, which is revised on 1 January and 1 July every year. But this too appears inadequate: 34.2% of pensioners are at risk of poverty, despite pensions increases. These increases are linked to both the consumer price index and the average gross salary in Croatia. As such, the average net pension amounted to €569.69, which is still below the poverty line.^[42] While some positive measures were introduced during the observation period, these do not aim to permanently improve the pension scheme. For example, a one-time cash benefit of €80 was awarded to all pensioners in December. However, entitlement to this benefit was not means tested, so even well-off pensioners received it, despite not needing it. Amendments to the Pension Insurance Act are still being debated in the Croatian Parliament. These amendments are generally positive, such as the introduction of a pension supplement, changing the adjustment formulas, increasing to 12 months the length of service awarded to mothers for the birth of a child. However, the amendments also introduce the possibility for pensioners to work full-time while retaining 50% of their pensions. Currently, Croatian pensioners can work up to four hours per day, for a maximum of 20 hours per week.^[43] In March 2025, 22 060 pensioners took advantage of this possibility, and more are likely to do so. The goal is to encourage pensioners to work, rather than creating a system that enables pensioners to live a dignified life after an active career. The NSG considers this a harmful development, especially considering the general inadequacy of pensions in Croatia.

The Croatian minimum income scheme, the Guaranteed Minimum Benefit (GMB), is also ineffective at combatting poverty. This is in large part because the benefit is very low, at €160 per month, far below the poverty threshold of €617,25 per month for a single person.^[44] The amount of the GMB is determined once a year by the Croatian government, which does not provide any clear calculation method. The European Commission points out in the Country Report of the European Semester that the coverage rate of the GMB was already low and continues to fall despite the increasing number of people at risk of poverty.^[45] Furthermore, the NSG highlights that beneficiaries are still obliged to work unpaid for 60 to 90 hours per month, or risk losing their GMB. Analyses by CSOs have stressed repeatedly the highly problematic nature of this obligation: It violates several human rights, including the prohibition of forced labour and the right to social protection.^[46] GMB beneficiaries were also excluded from two packages of measures aiming to mitigate the effects of inflation, particularly the increase in energy prices, even though the GMB calculation method seems not to take inflation into account.^[47] All this clearly highlights the precarious situation GMB beneficiaries are in and are likely to continue to be in unless substantial improvements are made.

A minor improvement to the situation of GMB beneficiaries came in the March 2025 amendments to the Social Welfare Act, when two exceptions to the obligation of unpaid work were introduced, namely illness and participation in social mentoring.^[48] In addition, the GMB calculation rates were increased by 25 percentage points for several more social groups, including single-parent families, children, pregnant women and women who have given birth during the previous six months.^[49] The amendments also included other childcare measures, such as one-time compensation for adoptive parents. In February 2022, benefits for newborn children were doubled, parental leave benefit limits were increased, and the duration of paternity leave was doubled.^[50] At the end of 2024, the Temporary Support Act established a child support fund to help children whose parents do not pay child support.^[51] The amendments also grant entitlement to the full GMB amount to those victims of domestic violence and human trafficking who were granted crisis accommodation. Homeless people in secured accommodation or organized housing in a shelter, too, now qualify for the full amount.

Despite these minor improvements, Croatia's social welfare system is performing inadequately. Although the European Commission praised Croatia in its Country Report for fulfilling the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), the NSG points out that many of the measures aimed at reducing poverty are likely to prove ineffective.^[52] The NRRP foresees a reduction in the at-risk-of-poverty rate to 15% by 2027, but this seems highly optimistic given the continued increases in the at-risk-of-poverty rates of various social groups. This ineffectiveness might in part be due to the mostly symbolic involvement of CSOs and social partners in the NRRP drafting process and to only 5% of NRRP funds being spent on social policies.^[53]

Other factors that make this target less likely to be reached include Croatia's below-average spending on social protection. This was 20.6% of GDP in 2023, an increase of only 0.3 percentage point from 2022^[54] and significantly below the 2022 European average of

27.9%. Croatia is also below the European average in many other key indicators: the poverty risk rate, the relative median poverty risk gap, the persistent at-risk-of-poverty rate (for both the total and the working-age population) and the adequacy and coverage of minimum income. These are key social challenges, highlighted by the EU Social Protection Committee, alongside poverty and social exclusion for persons with disabilities and high regional disparities in poverty and social exclusion.^[55] The impact of social transfers on poverty reduction, at 21.62%, is among the lowest in the EU and significantly below the European average of 34.15%.^[56] The social welfare system is hampered by staff shortages, which cause delays and prevent requests from being resolved within legal time limits. These delays diminish the benefits' effect in reducing poverty, which is additionally problematic as the benefits are meant as emergency solutions.^[57] The adoption of a new Action Plan as part of the National Plan for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion is also going more slowly than legally required. Its development only began in early 2025, despite supposedly covering the entire 2025-2027 period.



Civic Space

SCORE: 25

The CIVICUS Monitor continues to classify Croatia as “Narrowed”, a status that has not changed since 2018.^[58] This classification indicates that, while individuals and civil society organizations can exercise their rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, these rights are often violated through harassment, smear campaigns, lack of meaningful participation and political pressure on the media.

Civil dialogue

The situation of civic space and dialogue in Croatia has worsened, the NSG reports. Although in theory a positive development in terms of transparency, a setback is the entry into force of the Lobbying Act in October 2024. This law creates confusion over the line between public interest advocacy and private interest lobbying. NGOs are vaguely included in the definition of “lobbyists”, and a very broad definition of “lobbying” is provided.^[59] But the law also provides for several exceptions and utilizes broad formulations such as “the democratic right of the individual to express their opinion (...) either collectively or individually (...) through public consultations, referendums, petitions or citizens’ initiatives, or to advocate political or legislative change (...), activities of participants in public meetings, sessions, debates, (...)”. This wording creates legal confusion over CSO activities and treats civil society actors as professional lobbyists. CSOs have a fundamental role in a democratic system as watchdogs, and the expertise and evidence they accumulate through their work with social groups is essential for effective policymaking. But their resources and capacity are limited compared to those of the private, for-profit sector. Moreover, unlike private for-profit entities, CSOs advocate for the public interest. The legal framework should therefore recognize CSOs’ specific contributions and not add administrative and legal burdens that interfere with their work. Another difference is that for-profit-sector lobbyists may be able to avoid oversight by self-registering in the lobbyist register and then reporting once a year to the Commission for the Prevention of Conflicts of Interest. Yet this reporting is not publicly available, representing a serious lack of transparency over policy influences.

Other initiatives aimed at enabling civil dialogue have stagnated. The National Plan for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development was not adopted, and no visible progress was made, despite the previous plan ending in 2016. The Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs is responsible for the Plan’s preparation yet has not, nor presented any concrete developments of the Plan. In July 2024, Gong and several other CSOs urged members of parliament to reopen St. Mark’s Square to the public, after it was closed off with metal fences almost four years previously by a government regulation.^[60] The CSOs stressed that the measure limits access to key democratic institutions including the parliament, the government and the constitutional court and so constitutes an illegal restriction of fundamental rights. As the Croatian constitution requires that restrictions of rights take the form of laws, the CSOs argue that this restriction represents overreach by the executive.

CSO participation in public consultations is largely pro forma, and their input is not considered seriously by the government, the NSG reports. The Ombudswoman Report shows that CSO participation and comments in public consultations have decreased significantly and worryingly since 2023.^[61] In 2023, 325 CSOs participated in e-consultations, contributing 2 314 comments. But in 2024, only 127 CSOs participated, contributing 582 comments. This indicates a clear discouragement of CSOs, the NSG states, as they feel like their

input is not used or taken seriously. This feeling is also backed up by data from 2024,[62] when fewer than a fifth of 13 766 comments in e-consultations received a positive answer: 1 477 were accepted fully, and 1 272 partially. Most comments received no substantial answer: 4 143 were noted, and 5 288 were not accepted, while 5 288 were not answered at all. Reports on the implementation of these consultations were sometimes not published, despite publication being legally required. State administration bodies and authorities continue to disrespect legal requirements on consultation periods and the publication of consultation plans. Only 9% of consultations lasted the minimum period of 30 days, data shows.[63] Furthermore, CSO access to the e-consultation platform was restricted in May 2024 due to technical changes, the NSG reports. While the platform could be accessed through the e-Citizens system, CSOs needed high-level security credentials, requiring a lengthy and complicated procedure. CSOs denounced these changes as “an erosion of democratic standards and the rule of law in Croatia”.[64] These requirements were a substantial administrative burden and limited CSOs’ ability to engage in decision-making processes. CSOs highlighted the numerous technical issues they faced when using the system and the unjustified and excessive nature of these measures.[65] In June 2024, the access remained opened only for CSOs’ legal representatives, and not to other staff. the access remained opened only for CSOs’ legal representatives, and not other staff.



Just Transition

SCORE: 50

Access to energy and energy poverty

Croatia’s approach to energy poverty has shifted in the past few years, the NSG reports. Recent amendments to the Energy Efficiency Act define energy poverty in terms of levels and facilities in a specific national context, which includes a multitude of policies and acknowledges that energy poverty is caused by multiple factors.[66] This definition is also reflected in the Ombudswoman Report, which lists the main causes of energy poverty as low household incomes, high energy prices, houses’ poor energy efficiency and limited access to renewable energy. It also highlights several other contributing factors.[67] Vulnerable social groups are likely to be affected more severely due to their lower incomes and the increase in energy prices, the report points out. It also stresses the serious negative impact of energy poverty on health, quality of life and social inclusion.

Energy poverty is a serious concern, as 4.6 % of households cannot afford heating in the coldest months of the year.[68] Croatia allocated €25 million in incentives for households at risk of energy poverty. This formed part of a €652 million green transition package for 2025, which includes measures on renewable energy, decarbonization and sustainable transport.[69] Croatia has substantial potential from renewable energy sources, including biofuel and geothermal energy, according to a report by the Croatian Employers’ Association and Privredna Banka Zagreb.[70]

Croatia’s Social Climate Plan was due to be submitted by 30 June 2025. The NSG reports that it contains good policy ideas, addressing issues such as energy poverty, mobility poverty and assistance to vulnerable citizen groups, but implementation of these policies will be challenging. The key obstacle is a lack of data on people in energy poverty, so the NSG stresses the importance of cooperation and of adequate resource allocation to all stakeholders involved in the plan. The plan expressly acknowledges the problem of mobility poverty, but the NSG points out a lack of national data on the number of people experiencing this and that women are at higher risk.[71] The NSG suggests focusing resources on the electrification of public transport and wage increases for drivers.

The revised Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) was submitted to the European Commission in March 2025.[72] but the NSG points out that important legal requirements of the public consultation process were not respected. These included publishing official reports and responding to comments before the revised NECP was sent to the Commission. Furthermore, the report severely lacks ambition in target-setting for renewables and energy efficiency, despite formal EU warnings over these areas, according to the NSG. This lack of ambition also applies to the phasing out of gas and coal, and it compromises Croatia’s decarbonisation roadmap. Fossil fuel infrastructure is not only being maintained, but further expansion is being enabled, the NSG states.

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