



## The right to participation, human rights defenders and civil society

Updated: December 2025

1. During 2024 and 2025, no significant progress was recorded in the Republic of Croatia in ensuring the effective and meaningful right to participation of citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) in decision-making processes. Although the normative framework formally recognizes the right of the public to participate in the development of laws, strategies and other public policies, practice shows that participation is still carried out mainly formally, without any real intention of integrating the received proposals into final decisions.<sup>1</sup>
2. Public consultations are most often carried out in the final phase of the legislative process, when the basic policy solutions have already been defined. Thus, the participation of the interested public is reduced to a "corrective mechanism", instead of being an integral part of shaping public policy from the very beginning. This approach systematically weakens the quality of public policies and deepens the distrust of citizens and CSOs in institutional processes.<sup>2</sup>
3. A particular problem is the duration of public consultations. According to available analyses of the e-Consultation system, only a small part of consultations was conducted within the legally prescribed period of at least 30 days, while the majority was conducted within shortened deadlines, often with the justification of the urgency of adopting regulations. Such practice prevents quality analysis of proposals, consultations within organizations and the preparation of reasoned comments.<sup>3</sup>
4. Additional barriers to participation were introduced by amendments to the rules for participation in the e-Consultation system during 2024. The introduction of the requirement for registration through the highest level of security authentication for authorized representatives of NGOs was carried out without prior announcement or public discussion. Although some of the technical barriers were later removed, the problem of limiting participation exclusively to formal representatives of

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<sup>1</sup> Report on the implementation of consultations with the interested public in 2023, Ministry of Justice and Administration of the Republic of Croatia, available at: <https://mpu.gov.hr>.

<sup>2</sup> OECD, Open Government Review: Croatia, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/croatia.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Analysis of the e-Counseling system, Gong, available at: <https://gong.hr>.



organizations remained, thus ignoring the actual organizational structure and way of working of CSOs.<sup>4</sup>

5. Despite the high level of involvement of civil society organizations in the working groups for the development of action plans for the implementation of the National Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Combating Discrimination for 2025, the final versions of the documents published in public consultations significantly deviated from the proposals agreed by consensus. Detailed descriptions of activities and quantitative indicators of implementation were omitted, which significantly reduced the possibility of monitoring and evaluating policy implementation.<sup>5</sup>
6. Public participation in environmental procedures remains marked by serious structural shortcomings. Civil society organisations with relevant professional expertise are rarely included in environmental impact assessment committees, while public hearings are often organised at stages when projects have already started or even been completed. Such practices run counter to the purpose of environmental impact assessment procedures and international standards on public participation, including the Aarhus Convention.<sup>6</sup>
7. Of particular concern is the practice of conducting environmental impact assessment procedures for projects that have already been built and are operational, such as the Krš Pađene wind farm. In such cases, public participation loses all meaning, as decisions are made retroactively, without the possibility of real influence on the environmental intervention.<sup>7</sup>
8. The space for civil society to operate has been further narrowed by the worsening political climate and public discourse. Negative and delegitimizing rhetoric towards CSOs, especially those working in the areas of human rights, democratization and minority protection, contributes to creating a hostile environment for their work. At the same time, Croatia has not had a valid national policy for civil society development for almost a decade, which weakens the sector's capacity and sustainability in the long term.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Justice and Administration of the Republic of Croatia, Notifications on changes to the e-Counseling system, available at: <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr>

<sup>5</sup> National Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Combating Discrimination, Ministry of Justice and Administration of the Republic of Croatia, available at: <https://ljudskaprava.gov.hr>

<sup>6</sup> Aarhus Convention - Report on Implementation in the Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, available at: <https://mingor.gov.hr>

<sup>7</sup> Environmental Impact Studies – the case of Krš Pađena, Zelena akcija, available at: <https://zelena-akcija.hr>

<sup>8</sup> National Strategy for the Development of Civil Society – Status, Office for NGOs of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, available at: <https://udruga.gov.hr>



9. The Council for Civil Society Development, as a key advisory body to the Government, failed to fulfill its role in strengthening dialogue between the state and civil society during 2024 and 2025. The lack of a strategic work plan, infrequent meetings, and neglect of CSO proposals further undermined trust in institutional mechanisms of cooperation.<sup>9</sup>
10. Additionally, after the 2024 parliamentary elections, the work of the Government's Human Rights Council was de facto suspended. This multi-sectoral body, which played an important role in monitoring the implementation of international recommendations and encouraging dialogue with civil society, has not been convened once since the formation of the new Government, further weakening the system of institutional participation.<sup>10</sup>
11. SLAPP lawsuits and other forms of pressure continue to pose a serious threat to human rights defenders, journalists and activists. These practices particularly affect organizations working in the fields of environmental protection and the fight against corruption, and have a strong discouraging effect on public advocacy, freedom of expression and participation in public debates.<sup>11</sup>
12. The financial sustainability of civil society remains a key open issue. National and local funding sources are insufficient and unpredictable, while the administrative requirements for using EU funds often do not match the actual capacities of organizations. Access to funds for advocacy and research activities, which are crucial for effective civil society participation in public policy-making, is particularly limited.<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>9</sup> Council for the Development of Civil Society, available at: <https://savjetodavna-tijela.gov.hr>.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Council of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, available at: <https://ljudskaprava.gov.hr/ljudska-prava/savjet-za-ljudska-prava/1061>

<sup>11</sup> Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE), Croatia Report, available at: <https://www.the-case.eu>

<sup>12</sup> Financing civil society in the Republic of Croatia, National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society, available at: <https://zaklada.civilnodrustvo.hr>