UPR Pre-session on Croatia

Geneva, August 2025

Delivered by: Human Rights House Zagreb, with the support of the Centre for Democracy and Law Miko Tripalo

Statement

Honourable Representatives of the State,

This statement is delivered by the Human Rights House Zagreb, with the support of the Centre for Democracy and Law Miko Tripalo. The Human Rights House Zagreb is an independent civil society organisation dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Croatia. We coordinate advocacy initiatives with a wide network of partners and have long been engaged in the UPR process, providing monitoring, reporting, and evidence-based recommendations.

During the preparation of Croatia's national report, the Government organised a formal dialogue with civil society. However, this process was largely symbolic. It consisted of one-off, information-sharing meetings with limited opportunities for NGOs to provide substantive input, and no meaningful follow-up. This reflects a broader pattern of late-stage, formalistic engagement with civil society, where expertise is not fully integrated into state reporting or policymaking.

Today, I will address three priority areas where Croatia faces persistent challenges:

1. Human rights framework and institutions;
2. Freedom of expression, assembly, and civic space;
3. Hate speech, hate crime, and protection of human rights defenders.

I. Human rights framework and institutions

Croatia has ratified most core international human rights instruments, including the Convention on Enforced Disappearance in 2021. However, important gaps remain. The Revised European Social Charter, signed in 2009, is still not ratified. Croatia has also not

recognised the competence of the CERD Committee under Article 14, nor has it signed the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR. These omissions limit individuals' access to international remedies.

Implementation of international recommendations is inconsistent. State reports are delayed for years, and the Government Human Rights Council — established in 2021 to coordinate follow-up — has not reviewed a single report or recommendation.

The adoption of the National Plan for Human Rights and Combating Discrimination 2023–2027 was an important step after a six-year policy vacuum. However, its action plans excluded key measures on LGBTIQ+ rights and lack measurable indicators, undermining accountability.

The independence of ombudsperson institutions also remains a concern. The Ombudswoman for Children and the Ombudswoman for Gender Equality can be dismissed by Parliament if their annual reports are rejected. Moreover, the Ombudswoman's annual reports for 2022 and 2023 have not yet been debated in Parliament, blocking oversight and delaying reforms.

We recommend that Croatia:

- Ratify outstanding international instruments and ensure timely reporting;
- Adopt inclusive and measurable action plans under the National Human Rights Plan;
- Guarantee the independence of specialised ombudspersons, ensuring timely debate of their reports in Parliament.

II. Freedom of expression, assembly, and civic space

Strategic lawsuits against public participation, or SLAPPs, are one of the most serious threats to media freedom in Croatia. As of early 2024, more than 750 lawsuits were pending against journalists and media outlets, many initiated by politicians and judges. These lawsuits create a chilling effect and drain resources from independent media.

Instead of addressing SLAPPs, the Government has criminalised the "unauthorised disclosure of investigative information." This new offence has already been used against journalists, further deterring reporting on corruption and abuse of power. At the same time, threats, intimidation, and even physical attacks on journalists are increasing, with public officials often among the perpetrators.

Freedom of assembly is also restricted. Since 2020, St. Mark's Square — the seat of Parliament, Government, and the Constitutional Court — has been indefinitely closed to public protest by government regulation. Legal experts and several Constitutional Court judges have criticised this as unconstitutional, yet the restriction remains in place.

Finally, civic space is eroding. The Government Council on Human Rights has not convened since the 2024 elections, cutting off dialogue with civil society. The Council for Civil Society Development has become dysfunctional, and Croatia has lacked a national civil society development strategy since 2016. Funding for civil society is short-term, unpredictable, and often delayed, weakening advocacy and watchdog organisations.

We recommend that Croatia:

- Decriminalise insult and introduce robust anti-SLAPP safeguards;
- Lift disproportionate restrictions on assemblies, including reopening St. Mark's Square;
- Adopt a new national civil society development strategy, ensuring long-term, transparent funding for advocacy and watchdog work.

III. Hate speech, hate crime, and human rights defenders

Hate speech and hate crime remain widespread, targeting Roma, Serbs, and LGBTIQ+ persons. Courts often fail to recognise bias motivation, and hate crimes are frequently prosecuted as misdemeanours. Training for police, prosecutors, and judges is sporadic and not mandatory.

A stark illustration of the tolerance of hate speech was the May 2023 concert by singer Marko Perković Thompson, attended by tens of thousands of people. The fascist salute *"Za dom spremni"*, associated with the Ustasha regime, was repeatedly chanted. Civil society described the event as the largest pro-fascist gathering in Europe since the Second World War. Yet authorities failed to intervene, thereby normalising historical revisionism and extremist rhetoric.

Human rights defenders face similar challenges. Those working on migration, minority rights, and environmental protection are frequent targets of smear campaigns, harassment, and SLAPPs. Environmental defenders, in particular, face excessive inspections and criminalisation attempts when challenging controversial projects. Despite these risks, there are no dedicated state measures to protect defenders.

We recommend that Croatia:

- Strengthen monitoring and mandatory prosecution of hate speech and hate crime;
- Explicitly condemn and sanction fascist symbols and slogans such as *“Za dom spremni”*;
- Ensure an enabling environment for human rights defenders, including legal safeguards against harassment, intimidation, and SLAPPs.

Closing

Honourable Representatives of the State,

The challenges outlined reflect persistent gaps in Croatia’s human rights implementation. Addressing them is essential to building a democratic society based on equality, justice, and the rule of law.

We urge you to reflect these issues in your recommendations during Croatia’s fourth Universal Periodic Review and to call on the Government to ensure that international human rights standards are not only formally adopted but also genuinely implemented in practice.

Thank you for your attention.