

Croatia

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Capital: Zagreb
Population: 4.4 million
GNI/capita: US\$13,850

The social data above was taken from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's *Transition Report 2007: People in Transition*, and the economic data from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2008*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Electoral Process	4.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.00	3.25	3.25	3.25
Civil Society	3.50	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.75	2.75	2.75
Independent Media	5.00	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	4.00	3.75
Governance*	4.00	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.75	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
National Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.25
Local Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	4.75	3.75	3.75	4.25	4.50	4.50	4.25	4.25	4.25
Corruption	5.25	4.50	4.50	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.50
Democracy Score	4.46	3.54	3.54	3.79	3.83	3.75	3.71	3.75	3.64

* With the 2005 edition, Freedom House introduced separate analysis and ratings for national democratic governance and local democratic governance to provide readers with more detailed and nuanced analysis of these two important subjects.

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Croatia made some gains in institutionalizing reform during 2007 even as more entrenched problems, such as improving the judiciary, will require longer and more diligent government efforts. The moderate-nationalist government led by Prime Minister Ivo Sanader ended its first four-year mandate with few radical moves but displayed rather stable (if slow) governmental attempts to further reform. Perhaps most significant in Sanader's administration has been the mainstreaming of a pro-Europe reform agenda, one that few politicians or citizens would now dispute.

A narrow victory in the November parliamentary elections gave the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) another four-year mandate, but only after a month of negotiations that allowed HDZ to gain a majority through coalitions with several centrist parties and minority representatives. The election and subsequent negotiations between HDZ and its potential allies and the opposition Social Democrats (SDP) and its coalition partners demonstrated, despite electoral rhetoric, that all major parties are in general agreement on strategic areas of reform and the objective of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Croatia's election as a non-permanent UN Security Council member in the autumn of 2007 clearly marked a high point for foreign policy and domestic democratization; in 17 years, Croatia has transitioned from a war zone to Security Council member. The closing of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission in Croatia at the end of 2007 also signaled that Croatia has reached some level of democratic maturity, despite few signs that efforts to assist Serbian returnees and their reintegration improved during 2007.

Croatia continues its process of European Union (EU) accession as an EU candidate country, but progress reports from Brussels have been mixed. Of particular concern remain the independence and professionalism of judicial institutions, minority treatment, and the prevalence of corruption. Partially in response to EU and increasing citizen concern, a high-profile investigation of corruption within the state privatization fund took place in 2007. Cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and dealing with the legacy of the homeland war proceeded without particular social or political turbulence, owing partly to the slow proceedings of several high-profile cases.

National Democratic Governance. The HDZ-led government with its particular brand of moderate nationalism continued its slow consolidation of reform across government institutions in 2007. While no spectacular achievements were noted, the government demonstrated that it could balance at least moderate reform of domestic institutions without significant social or political turbulence. Political consensus on Euro-Atlantic integration is broad, and the trend toward resolving

conflicts through—rather than outside of—institutions intensified in 2007. *As recognition of this trend, the rating for national democratic governance improves from 3.50 to 3.25.*

Electoral Process. Croatia held parliamentary elections on November 25 in what was declared by domestic nongovernmental monitors as a generally democratic environment with no significant procedural transgressions except ongoing problems with some election registers. However, given the tight race between incumbent HDZ and opposition SDP, additional attention was paid to the issue of the diaspora vote and its potential influence on deciding the new government. SDP refused to be on the diaspora list and strongly suggested that electoral regulations regarding the diaspora need to be changed. Although the diaspora issue has not been resolved and some procedural problems with transparent registration continue to cause concern, neither is likely to have significantly altered the outcomes. *Croatia's electoral process rating remains at 3.25.*

Civil Society. The position of civil society in Croatia is strong but constantly challenged by the country's most influential nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which are fed by a populism that contradicts the usual perception of civil society. NGOs associated with the Catholic Church and war veterans are often on the side of rigid nationalism and ethnic exclusivity and demand state independence from international mechanisms, whether it be the EU or ICTY. At the same time, the most influential pro-Western NGOs like GONG (Citizens Organized for Observing Voting) and Transparency International, followed by numerous ecological and animal rights organizations, continue to build a following while working to engage with and monitor government activities. *Croatia's civil society rating remains at 2.75.*

Independent Media. Croatia is under the strong influence of corporate journalism (particularly in print media) that tends to minimize professional standards in order to maintain market positions among advertising companies. The most influential media remains the national television HTV, which continues to exist under political patronage despite efforts to evolve into a public television. This was evidenced by the 2007 appointment of a Tudjman-era figure as HTV's new head. *The media sector remains among several areas of transition that have developed more slowly than expected, however, owing to some self-regulatory actions noticeable in 2007 the rating improved from 4.00 to 3.75*

Local Democratic Governance. The wide gap between decentralizing responsibilities, local-level capacities, and accountability continues to be a challenge to local democratic governance. In 2007, this was demonstrated most clearly in the town of Dubrovnik, where the illogical separation of powers and coordination among local, prefect, and state levels made fighting particularly severe. Also, in Osijek a political stalemate left the town without a mayor and paralyzed the local government for

months. A newly passed election law on local government will allow direct election of mayors and county prefects and should improve accountability when it goes into effect in 2009. *There are overall positive trends in establishing a more decentralized system in Croatia, while at the ground level confusion remains in practice; thus, the rating for local democratic governance stays the same at 3.75.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. Croatia's weak domestic judicial tradition, combined with the transition and conflict turbulence of the 1990s, has produced very fragile judicial institutions. Despite efforts at reform, many local courts are much lower than the national standard and continue to produce questionable results; erratic rulings from the Split and Lika regions in 2007 illustrate this ongoing challenge. At the same time, politicians continue to advocate the use of domestic courts for war crimes cases that are currently under ICTY jurisdiction. But, it is questionable just how realistic this idea is given the state of the domestic war crimes trial process. A number of practical reforms to help efficiency were enacted in 2007, but their effects are yet marginal. *Judicial framework and independence remains a weak point in Croatia while current attempts at improvements do not yet show significant progress; thus, the rating remains at 4.25.*

Corruption. Corruption remains one of the key challenges facing Croatia as it attempts to fulfill EU accession criteria. Corruption is considered pervasive throughout public institutions, particularly health and judicial institutions. Government efforts to combat higher-level corruption were taken up a notch in 2007 with Operation Maestro, an investigation and prosecution of officials related to the Croatian Privatization Fund (Hrvatski Privatizacijski Fond). Despite the fact that Maestro targeted obvious institutional corruption, the operation has so far led to the prosecution and imprisonment of only three low-level officials. However, owing partly to this and other government efforts, the public now perceives corruption as one of the country's central problems and is demanding a more serious anticorruption policy as evidenced by the campaign platforms of all major political parties during the November elections. *Owing to improvements in public and political will in Croatia, as well as actions taken by the government, the rating for corruption improves from 4.75 to 4.50.*

Outlook. Political agreement on Euro-Atlantic integration will go only so far in satisfying an electorate increasingly worried about the domestic economic situation. The November 2007 election results confirmed the dominance of the two major parties but did little to distinguish their specific reform and economic programs. It is likely that 2008 will witness a NATO membership invitation as well as further progress on EU accession. However, less than serious attempts to address EU concerns on judicial reform, corruption, and economic reform, or further political disputes with Slovenia (head of the EU presidency at the beginning of 2008) over sea borders and fishing rights, could further slow Croatia's progress toward EU integration and further fuel citizen distrust of the government and its institutions.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.25

Croatia's internal stability and modest economic growth in 2007 strengthened the country's democratic framework and continued its transitional progress toward full European Union (EU) membership. Prime Minister Ivo Sanader completed his first four-year mandate, and after a narrow election victory at the end of November, he began a second mandate using his brand of moderate nationalism to continue governmental reforms. Four years ago, there were few outside of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) who claimed that Ivo Sanader would maintain a pro-EU path. Yet, overall, his government has managed to make enough accession-related reforms to keep sight of EU standards and to prevent a backward slide into the more authoritarian institutional tendencies of the Tudjman era.

At the same time, investigating and cleaning up the non-democratic actions and crimes of the Tudjman era has been less rigorous than many in the opposition and independent observers would like. At the top of the list, war crimes committed against Croatian Serb civilians and soldiers until now have been poorly investigated and prosecuted. The Lora prison trials in Split still linger without much end or purpose in sight. Also, hidden or shadow government institutions that existed during the war years have not been fully disclosed. For example, while Sanader has not engaged in near the level of institutional manipulation as Tudjman, the scandal that erupted in 2007 with Slovenia in the ongoing dispute over the Croatian/Slovenian sea border illustrated two areas of enduring institutional weakness: Sanader—like his Slovenian counterpart—showed that he is not above using his government to encourage nationalist radicals to instigate tensions against Slovenian nationalists. Second, the fact that such an incident was “coincidentally” captured on tape by security services and later released to the media points to the still somewhat messy management of the security services.

On a more institutional level, the numerous suspicious privatizations of large national companies to close Tudjman associates have yet to be thoroughly investigated. Despite the complexity of untangling all the government institutions involved, a properly reformed judicial system would go a long way toward making the privatization process more transparent, as well as achieving EU standards on war crimes prosecution.

However, it should be noted that while many weaknesses in Croatian democratic governance remain, fear that these will spill outside of the institutional framework has lessened significantly. All mainstream political parties now reflect the general popular consensus that Croatia should engage and aspire to Euro-

Atlantic integration and democratic standards. No main political party aims to stop negotiations with the EU, but also no main political party necessarily supports radical changes toward eliminating corruption.

In mid-2007, Ivica Račan, long-term leader of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), died of cancer, leaving the largest opposition party without a chairman. At the same time, Račan was a symbol of the SDP's softening of its ideological position toward liberalism.

The subsequent party convention brought the young face of Zoran Milanović to the head of SDP, but election platforms and the pre-election decision to propose economist Ljubo Jurčić as the potential prime minister all suggested that SDP was shifting its more traditional left social democratic message to appeal to a more centrist one. This in effect blurred the differences between the two main political parties; SDP's edging from left to right was simultaneous with similar moves inside HDZ, where the elite have become much more in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration and much less nationalist than their own base of voters.

Public frustration with the Parliament's failure to clean up government institutions can be attributed partly to what is perceived as a growing gulf between the lives of parliamentarians and those of average citizens. As the so-called political elite, each member of Parliament (MP) has a salary of roughly four times the monthly national average (4,000 kuna, or approximately US\$800) and enjoys perks such as a generous lifetime pension. The transparency of officials' finances has improved, yet the perception remains that although Parliament performs well enough to pass the EU-related reform legislation, it is slow to address key domestic issues. For most, Croatia's high unemployment rate, corruption, and economic conditions are top concerns. The World Bank¹ ranked Croatia slightly higher in terms of economic development, but many concerns remain regarding the country's growing foreign debt.²

The security services provoked several public scandals in 2007 but fewer than usual for Croatia, so this sector can be understood as continuing its reform toward professionalization and transparent oversight. In January, the Central Intelligence Agency (*Središnja Obavještajna Agencija*) began checking the background of several nongovernmental organization (NGO) activists who, while cooperating with state institutions, could come in contact with top-secret materials. The background checks were not conducted in the proper manner or through proper channels and, consequently, were considered a breach of individual privacy rights. An investigation concluded that the government, not the secret services, was primarily responsible.

Another incident involved three women MPs who publicly stated³ that they suspected the secret services of following them and offering details of their personal lives to the media. Finally, an internal conflict or lack of coordination between the secret services and the Ministry of the Interior resulted in the arrest of blog journalist Željko Peratović for republishing already released security services-related documents on his website, indicating the need for further improvement in the professionalization and oversight of the security services.

Since the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Croatia has been closely observed in its cooperation with the prosecution of war criminals. From the arrest of General Ante Gotovina at the end of 2005, Croatia's cooperation has been considered positive. But distrust of the process still scores high domestic political points. There are many public statements from both social and political arenas that depict the ICTY as an enemy of Croatia's sovereignty. Yet in terms of the official cooperation between the government and the tribunal, 2007 passed without many negative incidents.

However, at the end of the year a scandal broke out when General Mladen Markac, indicted and under house arrest in Croatia while on trial at the ICTY, was caught boar hunting with the minister of the interior, Ivica Kirin, a clear violation of tribunal regulations. General government disrespect for Hague institutions likely played a part, but it is also likely that the parties involved sought public sympathy for Markac to offset attention on the actual sensitivities discussed at the trial. Markac is one of three Croats (along with Gotovina and General Ivan Čermak) facing ICTY charges for planning, organizing, and carrying out ethnic cleansing of Croatian Serb villages in North Dalmatia (the former Krajina region). For Croatia, this is the most important ICTY trial to date, since the possibility of a negative ruling would challenge the official line (and general public understanding) that Croatia was only defending itself and did not have a plan to cleanse the territory of ethnic Serbs.

Ethnic tensions remain a concern, especially in the Lika region as well as the area north of the city of Zadar. During 2007, there were fewer incidents than in previous years, but the situation is far from stabilized and includes night vandalism on property of Serbian returnees. And while authorities are now properly reporting on such criminal acts, actual integration of the minority populations is very low. According to political representatives of the local Croatian Serb population, there are still significant problems with ownership of agricultural land as well as other property issues.⁴ Also, there are still many areas where no Serb is employed in the police force or any other state or national institutions, such as post offices, hospitals, schools, and electric or water companies.⁵ While the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) ended its mandate in Croatia at the end of 2007, declaring that it had met its objectives in assisting democratic transition and minority integration, the situation on the ground in these regions looks significantly less optimistic.

At the national level, Croatian Serb minority parliamentary representatives, together with other ethnic minority representatives, helped the HDZ piece together enough seats to form a new-old government. Slobodan Uzelac from Milorad Pupovac's leading Independent Democratic Serbian Party (Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka; SDSS) was appointed vice president of government for economic development, reconstruction, and return of displaced people. This symbolic gesture represents governmental orientation toward further normalization of ethnic relations within the country. The real impact will be seen during the coming year.

Electoral Process

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
4.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.00	3.25	3.25	3.25

The 2007 parliamentary elections⁶ were held on November 25 in a generally democratic and transparent process. However, the close race further highlighted key areas for election reform relating to the diaspora vote, voter lists, and campaign financing.

Results showed that the HDZ received the largest number of votes; however, no one party or coalition of parties secured a parliamentary majority. A relatively narrow win by HDZ with 66 parliamentary representatives over SDP's 56 seats and its coalition partners—Croatian Peoples Party (Hrvatska Narodna Stranka; HNS) with 7 seats and Istrian Democratic Party (Istarska Demokratska Stranka; IDS) with 3 seats—forced both major parties to seek additional coalition partners to form a government.

This political horse trading took three tense weeks,⁷ but the HDZ finally convinced the centrist Croatian Peasant Party (Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka; HSS) and Croatian Social-Liberal Party (Hrvatska Socijalno-Liberalna Stranka; HSLS)—which in coalition (HSS-HSLS) comprised eight representatives—to come over to its camp. These seats, combined with deals made with all of the ethnic minority representatives, allowed the HDZ to form a government.

At one point when it looked as though the stalemate would not be resolved, President Stipe Mesić invoked constitutional Article 97, which defined 77 representatives as a majority to be given a mandate for government. This in turn opened the question of possible changes to current regulations in order to provide clear guidelines for such situations. However, right after this debate began, the HDZ managed to finalize its deal with the HSS-HSLS; thus the issue lost attention and is likely to be forgotten.

Other election controversies are more likely to linger in the public's attention. The question of the diaspora's right to vote remains a hot political issue, with the two main political parties taking opposite positions. HDZ supports current regulations where Croatian citizens living abroad have the right to vote and have one separate list that carries eight MPs. On the other side, SDP supports the idea of changing this regulation in order to dismiss the right of Croatian citizens (primarily) living in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) to vote in elections in Croatia. There are a large number of BiH citizens living in BiH who obtained double citizenship as Croats, as all BiH ethnic Croats have the right to apply for a Croatian passport.⁸ These BiH citizens vote regularly in Croatian elections. The votes traditionally go to HDZ;⁹ thus, it is understandable why HDZ has pushed to keep the current electoral regulations.

To demonstrate its disagreement, SDP refused to be on the election list for the diaspora in the 2007 parliamentary elections. Given the close race, SDP could argue that the diaspora helped tip the balance in HDZ's favor. While again in

opposition, it is likely that SDP will continue to push for regulations closer to those in other European countries.¹⁰

The diaspora issue also affects how elections are conducted. For example, during 2007 there were several court rulings on diaspora cases from the 2005 presidential elections. In the case where the NGO GONG (Citizens Organized for Observing Voting) sued members of one of the diaspora voting commissions, Split's local prosecution office confirmed irregularities but dropped all charges against the commission members.¹¹ GONG also complained repeatedly about confusion in the voter registries that allows manipulation and listing of the deceased as regular voters. GONG posted monitors at diaspora sites in BiH during the elections, but diaspora voting is generally more difficult to regulate given the multiple voter sites.

The elections also highlighted the fact that registration lists are still not completely accurate. According to official data, 4,073,294 voters were registered in 2007, 105,000 more than in 2003. This information is even more questionable given the fact that there are at least 900,000 underage citizens out of a total population of 4.5 million, not 5 million as voter registration data would suggest. Elections were repeated in a few places, such as Negoslavci, Mursko Središće, and Batina, owing to irregularities resulting from a larger number of ballots than voters.

Election financing also continues to be a concern. GONG has been the key organization to raise attention on this issue,¹² and although other organizations and political actors have also raised concerns, the will to tackle this issue will likely not be high on the agendas of either of the two largest parties until forced by public opinion.

On the same day as the parliamentary elections, the city of Osijek¹³ held local elections to fill the seat of a dismissed mayor. GONG¹⁴ protested this idea, claiming that different regulations for parliamentary and local elections would cause additional confusion, cost, and possible mistakes. Elections were held without major irregularities. However, the poll simply repeated earlier results: No single party received enough votes to form a government, and no combination of parties could agree on forming a government. Re-elections are likely in early 2008.

In addition to elections, Croatia finalized changes to some electoral regulations during 2007, with the most significant change related to local elections: Voters will now directly choose mayors and *župans* (county prefects). These changes will be tested for the first time in 2009, when the next local elections are scheduled. Overall, these changes should improve the representation quality of the local government, even as a number of concerns have emerged (see "Local Democratic Governance").

The new law also proposes some changes relating to mayoral and *župan* candidates, including a provision that all candidates must have at least six months of residency in the area where they are running. The law also stipulates that both mayors and *župans* could be elected during the first round if they collect more than 50 percent of the votes. Otherwise the two main candidates would go on to a second round.

According to the new regulations, candidates must file their candidacy with a certain number of signatures. For instance, the threshold is 50 signatures in smaller

rural areas, while 5,000 signatures are necessary for Zagreb mayoral candidates. A referendum to dismiss the elected mayor or *župan* can be called by 33 percent of registered voters or by the local Parliament or council. Finally, the new law obligates the local ruling party to offer at least one vice presidential position to representatives of national minorities if they have 15 percent of voters.

Civil Society

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
3.50	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.75	2.75	2.75

The development of Croatian civil society remains high in most of the relevant statistics and is understood to be more developed than many other transitional areas of Croatian society. Unlike other sectors, Croatia's civil society developed significantly during the decade of the late president Tudjman's authoritarian government. The NGO scene of strong human rights groups and their opposition to Tudjman policies, as well as generally strong public acceptance of trade unions, became much less influential as both the Račan and Sanader governments proceeded to adopt almost all of the basic standards that civil society groups demanded during the 1990s.

The state protects the rights of the civic sector according to accepted standards of a democratic society. While legislative controversies periodically occur—for example, over the taxing of civil society organizations—the basic legislative framework has been set to allow the growth and development of a vibrant civil society in Croatia. This has also included the state's establishment (like that of many countries in the Central Europe region) of the National Fund for Civil Society Development, which provides some level of funding to groups applying for grants.

However, while this formula meets the approval of most donors, it should be noted that the state continues to provide significant support to civil society organizations that do not necessarily conform to the envisioned Western liberal civil society model. In this way, the state makes some civil society organizations stronger than others and makes it challenging for those not under “state patronage” to be sustainable. The most influential civil society institutions remain those organized around the Croatian Catholic Church and the former soldiers of the homeland war, neither of which arena is known for exhibiting liberal and tolerant attitudes. The social and political roles of this powerful religious institution permeate government decisions regarding civil society groups. During 2007, the most influential church activities were connected with strong pressure on the state education system to use church teachings on sexual abstinence, abortion, and homosexuality as the main basis for the Croatian education system.

Today, human rights-oriented civil society organizations are generally far less focused on basic human rights issues than during the 1990s. This is because there are fewer human rights abuses, but also because many human rights protectors

(and their donors) have moved on to other issues of reform. The Croatian Citizens Committee (Hrvatska Helsinški Odbor; HHO) remains the largest national human rights-oriented NGO. However, like many others, it has refocused much of its effort on monitoring government transparency and so forth. While international organizations such as Human Rights Watch¹⁵ point out that essential human rights problems in Croatia are still connected with Serbian returnees, few domestic NGOs focus attention on these issues apart from those groups established by Serbian returnees themselves.¹⁶

Donor funds for basic human rights work have for the most part shifted to the issues of governance and transparency, which many of the large domestic organizations are tackling. However, even this concentration of efforts on such necessary activities has done little for the overall sustainability of the more politically focused civil society organizations in Croatia. A 2007 report by the American Academy for Education Development concludes that civil society in Croatia is among the most vibrant in the region,¹⁷ but its long-term sustainability (notwithstanding external donor efforts and institutional grants) remains a question. For example, at the end of October, even the previously well-financed HHO publicly announced that it was having financial problems and requested citizens to make donations.

Women's rights organizations, such B.a.B.e (Be Active Be Emancipated) and the gender issues-oriented Iskorak and Kontra, are among the most active civil society organizations and are campaigning continuously on issues such as domestic violence. For example, these groups heavily criticized HDZ MP Ivana Sućec-Trakoštanec, who stated in Parliament that each woman is valuable in relation to the number of babies she produces.¹⁸

Trade unions continue to have a strong social role and political influence, particularly as an increasing number of investigations into suspicious privatizations remind workers that few other actors are willing to protect their interests. The most influential union remains the Union of Independent Trade Unions of Croatia (Savez Samostalnih Sindikata Hrvatske; SSSH), followed by the Union of Workers Trade Unions of Croatia (Udruga Radničkih Sindikata Hrvatske; URS), Croatian Union of Trade Unions (Hrvatska Udruga Sindikata; HUS), Independent Trade Union (Nezavisni Sindikat; NS), and many other combinations of professional and regional unions. Overall, trade unions are seen as being relevant and fairly independent political actors.

In 2007, one of the most prominent national union leaders, Boris Kunst from URS, announced to little fanfare his departure from the union to join HDZ. This was not understood as a scandal, given the general independence of Croatian trade unions from political parties. By contrast, a local union leader from HUS, Jozo Marić, was publicly criticized when he was pictured dining with the owner of a company in dispute with its own workers.¹⁹

Along with being a tourist destination, Croatia is becoming internationally known for its sports hooliganism.²⁰ The football (soccer) national division is understood as such an important social issue that every Croatian government (including Socialist) has supported the sport and its fans, both transparently and

non-transparently. Football hooligans, who provoke massive public violence at sports events and in the streets, are usually organized in groups financed by the sports clubs, which give privileges like free tickets and organized trips to members.

Football supporters have been instrumental in delivering political messages that “respectable officials” can no longer make, such as support for The Hague-indicted generals, Ante Gotovina and Mirko Norac. This combination can be dangerous, especially in a clash with similar elements from Serbia or BiH, or even with domestic youngsters from Zagreb, Split, and Rijeka. When profiling these youths, studies suggest that the church has some influence on football supporters, since many usually claim religion as important among their system of values. Many also tend to share far-right attitudes, with elements of racism and strong nationalism or regionalism. Overall, sports hooliganism has served as a mechanism to release societal pressure, as well as a mirror on extremist values, as the country attempts to deal with its wartime past.

Independent Media

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
5.00	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	4.00	3.75

Croatia has few high-quality media outlets offering consumers more than tabloid news or bureaucratic statements from governmental officials and their opposition rebuttals—all of which are packed with advertisements. Professionally driven and publicly responsible media are rare in Croatia, and the quality among each of the 10 most important printing and broadcasting companies has been weak during the past few years. Journalism as a profession deteriorated during the 1990s, thanks to the strong arm of the late president Tudjman’s regime, when daily papers and national or local televisions were competing to serve the ruling HDZ.

Subjects such as war crimes committed by domestic soldiers, as well as numerous irregularities in the privatization process and economic transition in general, have not been covered professionally or presented to the public, and still suffer from political and economic influences, as well as self-censorship. This decade of low professional standards gave way to the transitional winds that emerged in the early 2000s, when the first liberal reform government came to power. Media did improve, but not far enough to reach their self-proclaimed professional standards.

Changes at the top of Croatian TV (Hrvatska Televizija; HTV) were the most important media happenings in 2007, given that national television is more influential than all other electronic and printed media combined. HTV’s public board includes the requisite civil society representation, but the newly appointed editor in chief, Hloverka Novak-Srzić, has raised questions about the professed aims of HTV to transform from a state TV into a public outlet. Novak-Srzić is an experienced television journalist who, until her appointment, was one of the most

influential editors at Nova TV. More significantly, she gained her credentials serving HTV during the Tadjman regime, a troubled era for journalistic standards.

A comparative survey taken in 10 countries of southern Europe²¹ on the quality of television broadcasting estimated that HTV's half-hour evening news was watched by 16–21 percent of consumers during April 2007, while Nova TV in comparison drew 7–10 percent of viewers for its news program. None of the smaller national media outlets, including Nova TV and RTV, can seriously compete with the publicly influential HTV.

Croatia has numerous radio stations; most are mainstream oriented, with very few specialized for a specific audience. Besides the HRT network of radio stations, the most influential station is Radio 101 from the capital city, Zagreb, which stands above all others in terms of quality and influence. However, Radio 101 cannot be heard in other regions, such as Dalmatia.

Print media continue to struggle between advertisements and tabloid-style investigations. The main printing house remains Europa Press Holdings (EPH), owned by Ninoslav Pavic. EPH holds the number two best-selling national daily, *Jutarnji List*, the biggest regional daily, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, the best-selling weekly, *Globus*, and the leading women's magazine, *Gloria*. In 2007, EPH acquired the internationally-awarded Croatian political weekly *Feral Tribune*. This magazine had suffered several years of financial crises owing to low advertising,²² as well as the previous government's policies against independent voices in print, especially the satirical tone that made *Feral Tribune* famous. Rijeka's daily *Novi List* also displays higher than average standards of professionalism. The continuation of both independent papers during 2007 helped to keep the field diversified and held to some professional standards. The Catholic Church's chief news organ remains the weekly *Glas Koncila*.

Overall, there is very low overt government pressure or harassment of the media. The October 2007 arrest of journalist Zeljko Peratović, who runs a conspiracy theory Internet blog, apparently surprised even Prime Minister Sanader. While Peratović spent a day and a night in jail for publishing confidential state materials on his blog, Sanader publicly denied any involvement in the case, criticizing those who produced the scandal. A month after the arrest, it was still unclear why Peratović had been arrested since the allegedly confidential material had already been published several years earlier.

Blog journalism and general Internet usage became trendier and more widespread in 2007. For the first time, parliamentary campaigns used the Internet to communicate with voters outside of the traditional news websites. Many politicians, such as Vesna Pusic, Zoran Milanović, and Vesna Škare Ožbolt, are active bloggers. And on the other side, the minister of the interior, Ivica Kirin, became infamous in the autumn for obscene videos posted on YouTube presenting him as a ridiculous politician (“Kiro Prosviro” [“Kiro Went Crazy”]). The situation became less funny when Kirin was caught by local media commenting that he knew SDP members were behind the posting of the videos because he recognized the posters' IP addresses. Kirin quickly denied this statement and the scandal was

forgotten, but concerns and questions about Internet activities in Croatia lingered for months thereafter.

Local Democratic Governance

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75

Changes adopted in Croatia's Law on Elections in 2007 now allow direct voting for local mayors and *župans* (county prefects) and also make it easier for voters to call referendums to change a mayor or *župan*. Some opposition parties registered concerns about these changes, suggesting that in the case of a referendum, it would be up to the government to install its representative as a part-time mayor or *župan* until the next elections, giving far too much power to the central government at the local level.

Similar to many transitional countries of the post-Soviet world, Croatia is in a constant struggle between state centralism and demands for local governance. Every political party claims that it is attempting to decentralize, each using a different agenda, but with few noticeable results. The main problem in developing high standards in local governance still lies in the fact that no serious attempt has been made to reinvent the administrative regions called *županija* (county). Croatia is divided into 20 counties that represent an executive power between national and city (or municipal) levels. This territorial and bureaucratic division was instituted during the Tudjman years and has been heavily criticized both domestically and internationally. It is true that Croatia has an unusual geographic shape (resembling a boomerang), but the *županija* borders are even less logical when looking at the historical and administrative regions.

Many analysts suggest that this system was designed to allow full control over the whole territory, and the *županija*-level executives were just one of the tools to do so. However, despite the mass production of bureaucratic regulations, the power structures between the national (state) level and *županija* and city levels are highly improvised and easy to manipulate, depending on who is prime minister in Zagreb. Accordingly, any serious attempt to improve local governance must take on the political 'hot potato' of questioning the actual structure of local government administration. Few parties, unless specifically demanded by Brussels to do so, are likely to take this up as a policy priority.

But public scrutiny of the poor performance of local governments increased during the summer of 2007, when unusually strong wildfires threatened local communities. In the historic UNESCO city of Dubrovnik, the local government was stretched to the limit when several large fires burned out of control on the BiH border, only kilometers away. It was clear that the local government did not have the internal communications or necessary connections with the Bosnian firefighting units to properly manage the crisis. This resulted in significant devastation of forests and property on both sides of the border, including outlying areas of Dubrovnik.

Osijek, the largest city in Slavonia, was the other regional city in the spotlight in 2007. For the better part of two years, Osijek has been paralyzed in its attempts to agree on a new mayor after former mayor and war commander Branimir Glavaš soured relations with HDZ president and prime minister Ivo Sanader and formed an independent regional opposition party. After going into opposition, Glavaš was accused of war crimes, which was probably the chief reason he quit (or was ousted from) HDZ.

The wide gap between capabilities and responsibilities of local governments saw little improvement during 2007. A large number of construction sites in the coastal area are mushrooming with no legally issued permits. Despite increased attention to this “wild building” and attempts to match urban plans with national standards, the local executive branches still have no capacity or legal power to deal with this problem and depend on action from Zagreb.

Many local governments, even those close to the national ruling party, accordingly found themselves caught between local demands and national regulations. A number of high-profile demolitions carried out by the National Ministry put local governments in the tough position of carrying out orders for destruction without the necessary capacities. For example, a number of home owners refused to leave their dwellings, causing forcible evictions by the local police.²³ The crackdown on illegal building at the national level has been a positive development in implementing the rule of law, but in general it has still proven to be too tough an issue for Croatian local governments to implement and a constant threat to public order.

Judicial Framework and Independence

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
4.75	3.75	3.75	4.25	4.50	4.50	4.25	4.25	4.25

Croatian negotiations with the EU are much slower than expected owing to poor results in developing a democratic and professional judicial system, a problem rooted in the 1990s. Like journalism, the judicial system was one of the basic instruments of the authoritative governments run by President Tudjman. A large majority of local and national judges were selected by party loyalty, not by professional standards, and were incapable of dealing with serious legal issues such as war crimes or privatization.

The results are obvious: In 2007, each Croatian court still sits on numerous hidden sentences and non-legal decisions that were made in earlier years in order to hide either traces of state involvement in war crimes or the secret deals of privatization. It is not surprising, then, that President Mesić has stated that the whole process of privatization was one large crime committed by a small minority to take national resources away from citizens.²⁴

Owing to significant pressure from the European Commission as well as public demands, Prime Minister Sanader's team did produce some positive results in the judicial sector in 2007. Official data claim a 120 percent increase in court decisions connected with corruption. And the government claims that a group of regulatory changes introduced in 2007 to allow more power to the investigator should significantly decrease corruption.²⁵

During 2007, a number of programs continued or were launched to increase the level of judicial functioning, but results are still modest. The government, for example, consolidated similar local courts into one larger court for better efficiency and to reduce case backlogs. A Code of Conduct was adopted for judges, a highly symbolic action that received media attention but did not impress the EU or local citizens. And it should be noted that there have been some improvements in making free legal aid more accessible to those who cannot pay.

But in terms of substance, the courts continued to be challenged. The most important and internationally observed case involves war crimes committed in the Lika region during the conflict years.²⁶ Here, General Mirko Norac (already sentenced for war crimes in a different case) and General Rahim Ademi are standing trial for crimes in the Gospić area. During the trial, the generals shifted responsibility between each other, reopening the issue of double or parallel systems of command carrying out different duties. As a practical matter, many believe that General Ademi was the official commander while General Norac was the real commander of the infamous liberation action taken by the Croatian army during 1993, when many civilians of Serbian ethnicity were found dead. The main judge in these proceedings, Marin Mrčela, is one of the rare highly respected domestic judges. However, there were many legal gaps during the trial, including several announced protected witnesses who did not show up in court and were likely threatened from doing so. In another instance, one of the infamous local judges from the Lika region, Branko Milanović, made national headlines in August when he agreed to temporarily release a prisoner charged with the high-profile murder of a person of Serbian ethnicity.²⁷

The local court system still suffers from significant abuse of office and political influence from Zagreb, often spotlighted whenever there are new appointments. For example, in Split *Županijski Sud* (county level) in 2007, the brother of the current state minister of education positioned himself to be president of the court and used state connections heavily to disparage his opponents.²⁸ Several print media were used for these lobbying campaigns, publishing one-sided opinions in favor of the state minister's brother.

Municipal courts in Split offered another symbolic case. Amara Trgo, a local judge, refused to rule in a courtroom where a Christian cross was hung near the state symbol. According to the media, the cross was hung by her colleague Judge Zoran Kežić with the explanation that the law does not forbid the display of Christian religious symbols.²⁹ However, Trgo's opinion was that the cross should not be displayed in the courtroom since it can be understood to mean the court is following church laws, not state civic laws. The regional paper published a photo

of Trgo dressed in Roman costume to suggest the ancient Roman treatment of Christians.³⁰ There has been no final decision in the matter.

Croatia's domestic judicial system has many deficiencies, including constant pressure from government officials to divert some cases from the ICTY to the Croatian justice system. Pressure to hand over the General Gotovina case to domestic courts is perhaps the most high-profile of these efforts, attracting the support of President Mesić, Prime Minister Sanader, and the main SDP opposition.³¹ It is highly questionable how realistic this idea is, keeping in mind the low standards of the system as well as the public denial of war crimes committed by domestic soldiers.

The forgotten war crimes case of Lora prison in Split progressed little during 2007, presumably waiting for the new government to come into power to take on the heavy political work of dealing with the complicated and historically botched legal process. With trial delays of more than a year,³² this matter provides little confidence that the country can take on additional sensitive war crimes cases from the ICTY without more judicial capacity and greater will.

Corruption

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
5.25	4.50	4.50	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.50

Widespread corruption remains one of the central problems of Croatia's transition toward full democracy. State institutions (especially regional bodies that are part of national systems) are understood to be among the most corrupt. Local courts, public health institutions, county administration, and state companies are not trusted to work transparently nor fully follow legal regulations.

During 2007, Croatia managed to achieve some results in its anticorruption actions. Namely, the adoption of the national anticorruption program, as well as increased penalties and strengthening of the independence and capacities of the special unit USKOK (Office for Fighting Corruption and Organized Crime), resulted in several successful investigations and a somewhat changed public perception regarding corruption.

Perhaps the most high-profile of these efforts was the arrest of several highly ranked officials from the Croatian Privatization Fund in an action called Operation Maestro.³³ The fund functions as the central institution representing the government in the privatization of companies owned by the state. The arrested officials are now awaiting trial for taking bribes to facilitate privatizations. However, political opponents were not satisfied with this action, suggesting that a proper investigation should produce higher-level figures than merely three vice presidents (Ivan Gotovac, Josip Matanović, and Robert Pesa) of the Croatian Privatization Fund.

Months before the parliamentary elections, the political parties unveiled competing anticorruption platforms and promises to modify their party images. These

small advances did not improve specific institutional capacities to fight corruption but rather indicated a change in political will to take corruption more seriously.

After Slovenia, Croatia is often cited as the most democratically and economically developed among the former Yugoslavian countries, although Croatia has lagged in terms of fighting corruption. However, in 2007 Transparency International Croatia (TIC) noted improvements in Croatia's attempts to fight corruption.³⁴ The survey cites similar ratings from other relevant institutions, such as the World Bank, and points out that the largest step forward has been made in the public recognition of corruption as the main cause of Croatia's low living standards.

Prime Minister Sanader has suggested that a number of anticorruption measures carried out by his government are primarily responsible for stopping the further worsening of corruption ratings. However, TIC cautioned that such successful anticorruption measures have been undertaken more to satisfy EU demands than to develop domestic anticorruption forces. Regardless, it should be noted that politicians are now competing to produce better anticorruption ratings, even though these gains are more public image than reality.

Still, Croatia continues with its "double loyalty" system of values, where hidden political agendas are more important than cash payments as basic sources of corruption. For example, analysts suggest that large national companies, both state-owned and semiprivate—such as major construction, telecommunications, oil, and electric companies—are hiding parallel internal networks that are either closely connected or even equal to the government. The result is access to the largest portion of the state budget through guaranteed sources and a system of connected companies in support of development programs. In other words, the general system of public tenders remains nontransparent, noncompetitive, and awarded mostly through pre-established arrangements and political connections.

Many ongoing expensive, nontransparent projects are financed through the Croatian budget. For example, the building of the controversial bridge to the peninsula of Peljesac to bypass BiH territory is a colossal undertaking and of questionable priority as part of the Split-Dubrovnik motorway construction. Some suggest that the group behind the project would not hesitate to provoke an international dispute with BiH in order to secure its own economic gains. Perhaps less dramatic but still lucrative, new scandals emerged in 2007 connected with the disputed building of several handball arenas for the European Handball Championships. Whatever the outcome of these investigations, corruption issues are likely to remain a significant political and institutional challenge for Croatia in the years to come.

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