



**Civic Space Report 2023**

**CROATIA**



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### **About European Civic Forum**

European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of nearly 100 associations and NGOs across 29 European countries: big federations of associations, national platforms uniting hundreds of thousands of NGOs, and smaller groups working at community level or engaging with the public on local issues. We work to build a democratic and civic Europe that delivers on people's needs.



### **About Civic Space Watch**

Civic Space Watch collects findings and analyses from actors in Europe on the conditions for civil society to operate, capturing national and trans-European trends in civic space. Through ongoing monitoring of social media and regular contact and interviews with a strong network of members and partners on the ground, we strive to provide easy access to resources and improve information sharing within civil society across Europe with, policy-makers and the media.

## Key Developments

- 🔍 Lack of policy framework to develop the civic sector and unfit funding policies leave civil society drained
- 🔍 Changes to the Council for Civil Society Development weaken civil society participation
- 🔍 SLAPPs, criminalisation, harassment, and smear campaigns target critical CSOs and journalists

**Civic space in Croatia remains narrowed<sup>1</sup>. Civil society is characterised by weak capacities in the context of fragile democracy and rule of law infrastructure.**

The lack of policies to develop and strengthen the sector as well as administrative burdens and unpredictable processes to access EU and national funding are among the main reasons for this. The National Strategy for civil society development and the National Program for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights expired in 2016 and virtually no progress has been made towards new policies. Additionally, the participation of NGOs in the decision-making processes has been weakened by changes in the institutions, including the changes to the functioning and representation in Council for Civil Society Development in 2020. As a result, the legitimacy of this body and the ability of CSOs to influence its decisions have been weakened. Over the last years, there have been many episodes of attacks and belittling of CSOs by the highest public officials in Croatia. NGOs which promote human rights, rule of law, and EU values were especially targeted. NGOs and volunteers supporting migrants have been criminalised and harassed. Croatia also made no progress towards addressing the European Commission's recommendation regarding strategic lawsuits against public participation which continue to target journalists.

<sup>1</sup> <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/croatia/>

# Institutional, political and socio-economic landscape

*"I believe that situation actually deteriorated...and that the dominant approach for the last 4-5 years has been to ignore civil society. At times our actions fail to provoke any kind of response [from the authorities]...not even an angry one, which may create an opening for some form of dialogue...We are no longer perceived by authorities as relevant societal factors, thus we are simply ignored".*

This quote taken from the recent research report<sup>2</sup> published by the Human Rights House Zagreb on the position and challenges faced by human rights defenders all but perfectly summarises the current landscape in which Croatian civil society organisations currently operate.

The primary trend is a dramatic reduction in the influence of civil society organisations in the policy-making sphere. A recent research report<sup>3</sup> published by the Centre for Peace Studies identifies four causes: i) dramatic decrease in the influence of EU institutions on national policy-making compared to the accession period, which represented an advocacy lever CSOs in Croatia utilised particularly well; ii) the long-term effects of the short-lived, but highly influential experience of the government dominated by far-right elements in 2016, which saw a "frontal assault" against watchdog CSOs in Croatia and their supporting ecosystem<sup>4</sup>; iii) decrease in capacities of public administration to deliver appropriate policy, including progressive initiatives in cooperation with CSOs and iv) generational change in many watchdog-oriented CSOs, with many prominent experts and activists moving either to the private sector or politics, in particular the political platform Možemo/Yes We Can, which is currently 3rd political force in the country. Most of these findings also resonate with the analysis published by Gong back in June 2020 which branded the recent turn in Croatian policy towards civil society as "state assaults"<sup>5</sup>. These outcomes discourage many CSOs from pursuing advocacy or watchdog-oriented development, leaving numerous important policy arenas absent effective civic oversight. Corollary, those CSOs still committed to this form of engagement are severely overstretched.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/KLJP\\_Tematski-Branitelj-FIN-3.pdf](https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/KLJP_Tematski-Branitelj-FIN-3.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cms.hr/system/publication/pdf/175/NOVI\\_PO\\_ETAK\\_-\\_Podloga\\_za\\_raspravu\\_o\\_novom\\_pristupu\\_pozicioniranju\\_i\\_radu\\_progresivnih\\_ljudsko-prava\\_kih\\_organizacija\\_u\\_Hrvatskoj.pdf](https://www.cms.hr/system/publication/pdf/175/NOVI_PO_ETAK_-_Podloga_za_raspravu_o_novom_pristupu_pozicioniranju_i_radu_progresivnih_ljudsko-prava_kih_organizacija_u_Hrvatskoj.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://civic-forum.eu/croatian-governments-triple-attack-on-autonomous-media-civil-society-and-culture/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://gong.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/drzavni\\_udar\\_na\\_civilno\\_drustvo\\_09062020.pdf](https://gong.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/drzavni_udar_na_civilno_drustvo_09062020.pdf)

# The regulatory environment for civic freedoms

## Lack of policy framework to develop the civic sector leaves civil society drained

The Croatian Act on Associations regulating the right to association remains in place and, for the most part, is adequate from the civic space perspective. However, the National policy document outlining support for civil society development expired in 2016 and Croatia remains without a strategy to support civil society's development. A draft developed via a participatory process in 2017 was abandoned<sup>6</sup> and a new working group was established in February 2022. This now marks the seventh year without a valid policy framework for the support of civil society in Croatia.

In addition, also the National Program for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights - which contains a set of important measures for the support of civil society organisations defending and promoting human rights - expired in 2016 and has not been renewed for six years in a row. As a result of the lack of a policy framework for the sector and increasing administrative demands, civil society in Croatia is characterised by weak capacities, which have drastically deteriorated since 2016. According to the CSO sustainability Index, despite a marginal improvement, most CSOs struggle to have a stable income in order to secure their organisational capacity and, in particular, their ability to maintain permanent paid staff<sup>7</sup>.

## Freedom of assembly

Freedom of assembly is protected by the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia and regulated by the Public Assembly Act.

Since October 2020, when a young man assaulted with an automatic rifle Banski dvori, which houses the office of the Prime Minister and serves as the meeting place of the government, on St. Mark's Square<sup>8</sup>, key democratic institutions are inaccessible - bounded by fences and guarded by police

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<sup>6</sup> <https://civicspacewatch.eu/croatia-civil-society-strategy-in-limbo-puts-at-risk-csos-financial-sustainability/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://storage.googleapis.com/cso-si-dashboard.appspot.com/Reports/CSOSI-Croatia-2021.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020\\_Zagreb\\_shooting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Zagreb_shooting)

forces - under the pretext of security risks<sup>9</sup>. Access to the Government, the Croatian Parliament and the Constitutional Court is only possible after registering at the police checkpoints where they record every movement in the protected area of St. Mark square. However, in May 2022, the Ministry of the Interior stated that the police did not keep records of who was passing.<sup>10</sup> Gong sent a letter to the Ministry of the Interior asking for the record of visits to the Parliament and the Government since October 2020, and the response was that these kinds of records are not necessary in order to achieve the goal and purpose of the established measures. According to international human rights standards on the right to peaceful assembly, any restrictions on assemblies in and around places of democratic relevance as courts, parliaments, or other official buildings must be specifically justified and narrowly circumscribed<sup>11</sup>. Although it is possible to register a protest, the fact is that the area is barricaded on both sides of St. Mark's Square discourages the organisation of protests.

According to public statements by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković the attack in October 2020 on the Government building was a terrorist act<sup>12</sup>, but the public still has no confirmation that this was really the case. In October, a new security assessment was to be carried out in order to determine whether there is still a danger of a new attack due to which the square should remain closed.<sup>13</sup> However, no information is available to the public regarding the outcome of the assessment, and the barricades are still standing. Additionally, no special security measures are applied around the building of the National University Library, where Government sessions have been held since the Zagreb earthquake in 2020, raising doubts on the justification of the closure of St. Mark's Square.

## Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is protected by the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia and regulated by the Electronic Media Act, Act on the Implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation, Act on the Right of Access to Information and the Croatian Radiotelevision Act.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://antikorupcija.info/hrvatska-gong-trazi-otvaranje-markova-trga-u-zagrebu/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/gong-mup-nam-kaze-da-ne-vode-evidenciju-kretanja-sticenih-osoba-markovim-trgom/2366717.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/GC37%20ENG.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/47378-zagreb-square-shooting>

<sup>13</sup> [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013\\_04\\_46\\_881.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013_04_46_881.html)

# Safe space

## Attacks and criminalisation of migrants' solidarity

Human rights defenders in Croatia are increasingly facing police harassment and are being subjected to smear campaigns both in public discourse and on social media. The human rights organisation Are You Syrious (AYS) created in 2015 in Croatia supporting migrants on the Balkan migration route has particularly been targeted. The Iraqi partner of Tajana Tadić, the program manager of the organisation, saw his refugee status abruptly terminated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in May 2020, on allegations that he represents a "threat to national security". Neither he nor his attorney have been given access to a part of his file which has been classified as "secret". He was previously harassed by police in relation to the woman activities for the protection of migrant rights<sup>14</sup>. The appeal process is still ongoing.

In 2021, another AYS activist Dragan Umicevic, who provided support in the asylum-seeking process of the Afghan Hussiny family in 2017, was fined a total of HRK 60,000 (ca EUR 7.968) and made to pay another HRK 1,300 (ca EUR 173) of judicial expenses for "*aiding and abetting illegal border crossing*"<sup>15</sup>. The Hussiny case drew public criticism because six-year-old Madina Hussiny was killed by a train on November 21, 2017 during the illegal pushback of her family from Croatia into Serbia in the middle of the night. The family was again expelled during the night between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of March 2018. After entering Croatia for the third time in the night between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2018, fearing another expulsion, they contacted AYS for assistance in seeking asylum. AYS explained to them that only the police can grant them asylum and referred them to the nearest police checkpoint. Umicevic was asked to go to the border police checkpoint and say that there was a refugee family in their vicinity wishing to apply for asylum. Although he acted in accordance with the law, the Ministry of the Interior had demanded a draconian fine of 320,000 kuna (€42,700) and prison time, as well as a ban on the operation of AYS. A 2021 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights found that as a result of the pushbacks, "*the State had hindered the effective exercise of the applicants' right of individual application by restricting access to their lawyer among other things*"<sup>1617</sup>. To date, no political or disciplinary actions have taken place against those responsible for the death of Madina.

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<sup>14</sup>[https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/croatia\\_-\\_ua\\_-\\_tajana\\_tadic\\_-\\_30\\_oct\\_2020.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/croatia_-_ua_-_tajana_tadic_-_30_oct_2020.pdf)

<sup>15</sup><https://n1info.hr/english/news/more-than-e8000-raised-for-ngo-volunteer-who-was-fined-for-helping-migrants/>, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/wp-content/uploads/Criminalisation.pdf>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.borderviolence.eu/wp-content/uploads/Criminalisation.pdf>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59329973>



Finally, in December 2022, an illegal police raid took place in the facilities of the environmental organisation Zelena akcija/Friends of the Earth Croatia. Five police officers entered the premises searching for "*migrants and people of poor financial status*" without a warrant and probable cause, intimidating the employee present<sup>18</sup>. Gong was among the CSOs who took part in the follow-up press conference, requesting a full investigation into the matter.

## SLAPPs threaten freedom of expression

Strategic Lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) are an enormous problem for freedom of expression in Croatia, with around a thousand active lawsuits by 2022.<sup>19</sup>

The most notorious SLAPPS are those filed by judges.

In October 2022, Judge Zvonko Vrban, the president of the County Court in Osijek, was awarded as the biggest judicial "bully" in Europe, due to a series of lawsuits against the Zagreb portal Telegram, its editor-in-chief Jelena Valentić and journalist Drago Hedl, an award-winning Croatian journalist and author of articles investigating suspected ethical misconduct on the part of the judge. The total amount sought in the complaints is around €120,000 in damages. The award is given by CASE - a coalition of non-governmental organisations from across Europe working against the threat posed to public watchdogs by SLAPPs – which identifies the worst SLAPP offenders with the European SLAPP contest. The award, unveiled under the auspices of the European Parliament and with the support of the Council of Europe aims at making the problem of SLAPP lawsuits visible to the general public and the jury composed of members of the European Parliament and of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe<sup>20</sup>.

One of the most recent and high profile cases involves Tris portal journalist Davorka Blažević, one of the most respected and experienced Croatian journalists. She was sued by Supreme Court judge Senka Klarić Baranović for publishing information already known to the public, in the column "Portrait of the week", Mrs. Blažević made a comment regarding all Supreme Court decisions rendered while judge Klarić Baranović was Head of the Supreme Court. Mrs. Blažević was sentenced to a fine of ca 5300 euros<sup>21</sup>. Considering this event, the Croatian Journalist Association organised crowdfunding for Mrs. Blažević's fine and announced it would start publishing the names of judges who initiate SLAPPs against journalists.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.zelena-akcija.hr/en/news/the-police-illegally-entered-zelena-akcija>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.hnd.hr/eng/cja-s-poll-at-least-951-active-lawsuits-against-journalists-and-media>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.the-case.eu/campaign-list/the-european-slapp-contest-2022>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.womeninjournalism.org/threats-all/croatia-journalist-davorka-blaevi-found-guilty-in-slapp-case>

# Funding for civil society

## Administrative burdens and lengthy processes put in danger the financial viability of the sector

The financial framework remained relatively stable in 2022, but this is hardly a positive development, particularly for watchdog organisations.

The national financing for CSOs is dominated by European Social Fund, which allocate a little less than EUR 95.65 million<sup>22</sup> for the specific goal of strengthening the capacities of civil society organisations and social partners in the area of good governance<sup>23,24</sup>. However, in the ESIF programming for 2021-2027, CSOs are seen primarily as social service providers, not policy-making actors. As a result, it includes virtually no support for critical, advocacy-oriented CSOs. The public granting system for this funding is also characterised by high volatility and unpredictability (in terms of gaps between projected and actual dates of call releases). Additionally, the funding foresees extreme administrative burden (alleviated only marginally by some meaningful innovations, such as simplified cost options)<sup>25</sup>. These obstacles, covered also in the previous ECF report on Croatia<sup>26</sup>, negatively affect the financial viability of the sector, as the civil society organisations in Croatia experienced financial exhaustion and administrative violence<sup>27</sup>.

Apart from the European Social Fund, the backbone of the financial support system of the Croatian civil sector is the institutional granting by the National Foundation for Civil Society Development. However, available funding has substantially decreased since 2016, when the government attempted to cut 70% of the foundation's sources<sup>28</sup>. While the cuts of this funding did not materialise to the extent announced, the current situation hardly allows for bolstering civic space. A considerable part of institutional funding is also being awarded to substantial number of clerical organisations close to

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<sup>22</sup> The sum corresponds to the entire 2014-2020 financial perspective.

<sup>23</sup> <https://gong.hr/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Missed-chances-and-broken-promises-The-Croatian-model-of-support-to-civil-society-through-the-European-Social-Fund.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <https://gong.hr/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-absolute-worst-How-Croatia-managed-the-European-Social-Fund-in-the-fight-against-corruption.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <https://gong.hr/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Analysis-of-Administrative-Burden-of-Applicants-During-EU-Project-Implementation-The-Experience-of-Civil-Society-Organisations.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> <https://civicspacewatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Croatia-.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://gong.hr/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Missed-chances-and-broken-promises-The-Croatian-model-of-support-to-civil-society-through-the-European-Social-Fund.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> <https://civic-forum.eu/civic-space/croatian-governments-triple-attack-on-autonomous-media-civil-society-and-culture>

the political right (currently, this is several opposition parties) which in effect work against pluralism and human rights. Among these organisations there is U ime obitelji/In name of the Family, which was the key instigator of the 2013 referendum which led to the introduction of the heteronormative marriage definition in the Croatian constitution. Funding from national sources other than ESF (lottery funding and budget) is highly limited and restricted in scope. The same, and more, apply to funding sources at the local and regional levels.

Taking all this into account it is not surprising that the 2019 research report on CSO access to funding<sup>29</sup> conducted by Human Rights House Zagreb established that CSOs in Croatia are extremely distrustful towards national, particularly public sector donors.

Access to funding from EU programmes - administered either centrally (for instance CERV) or devolved nationally (primarily Erasmus+) represents a critical lifeline for advocacy-oriented organisations, but these remain highly competitive and in practice available only to highly professionalised organisations. Other important sources of funding - such as EEA/Norway and Swiss grants are also an avenue to support watchdog and other critically oriented CSOs, particularly as they cover thematically relevant areas such as transparency, democratic participation, environmental protection etc. However, this funding is highly sporadic - for instance, Active Citizens Fund administering EEA Grants awarded a total of seven organisational supports each amounting to EUR 60.000 in 2022; but it is highly uncertain if this call will be repeated in 2023.

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<sup>29</sup> [https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Pristup-financiranju-za-organizacije-civilnog-drustva-u-Hrvatskoj\\_web.pdf](https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Pristup-financiranju-za-organizacije-civilnog-drustva-u-Hrvatskoj_web.pdf)

# Civil dialogue and right to participation

## Participatory mechanisms have been hollowed out

The key channel for inter-sectoral cooperation between public and civic sector is the Council for Civil Society Development. Prior to 2016, this forum was an important channel of advocacy, but also cooperation and information exchange between CSOs and the public sector. However, since the changes in the composition and the rules of procedures in previous years<sup>30</sup>, it no longer represents a forum for relevant discussion as its work is being rigged by discontinuity and newly established discipline among public administration representatives, who - through their majority in the body - shut down any type of dissenting conclusion. Representatives of public entities tend to vote in a highly coordinated manner, often with the sole objective of countering any risks to the Government's agenda. This among other things entails installing a president of the Council more conducive to Government's positions, voting down any conclusions/recommendations critical towards the Government, and perhaps most importantly, appointing in policy-making bodies CSOs representatives that do not have a watchdog mandate. This prompted Gong to this phenomenon, establishing there is a clear pattern of Council electing CSO representatives with little or no experience in respective policy fields, but often with a clear track record of "good cooperation" with the party in power or some of the coalition partners<sup>31</sup>. This is an emblematic example of how the institutional framework for civil society support and participation in Croatia has been hollowed, while seemingly remaining intact.

There are minor positive developments in the field of human rights and anti-discrimination policy. The Ombudsman Office currently remains the only public institution staunchly pushing for meaningful CSO participation in decision making, which In January 2022, it contributed to the establishment of the Governmental Council for Human Rights, continuously presided by the Vice-President of GoC from the ranks of minority coalition partner Independent Serbian Democratic Party. Although CSO representatives constitute only 3 out of 17 members, thus far this Council fostered a more inclusive, consensus-oriented approach to work compared to the Council for Civil Society Development. However, we wait for a more concrete policy impact of these deliberations.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://civicspacewatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Croatia-.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> <https://h-alter.org/vijesti/zeton-udruge-oblikuju-zakone-protiv-korupcije/>

Public consultations of various policy documents are an established practice, but from the perspective of CSOs, often highly ineffective. Usually, only online consultations are conducted. Deadlines for submitting comments are cut short of the usual legal provision of 30 days and public bodies commonly ignore the requests of the Commissioner for Information to abide by this rule. More often than not comments of CSOs are summarily rejected or simply ignored by being “taken under consideration”.

Access to information remains challenged and the Commissioner for Information confirms that numerous cases of requests for access to information are unlawfully rejected, as found by Human Rights House. Not only do Commissioner’s requests tend to be ignored by public authorities, but also by the judicial practice of the highest administrative court in Croatia - the Court may force the public body to change their practice in the specific case, but such a ruling will not achieve a change in practice in general. As quoted by the Human Rights House in its 2021 report on the state of human rights in Croatia, the most common reasons for rejecting access to information are i) risk of malicious use (29,82%); ii) protection of personal information (15,8%); iii) lack of access to the requested information (13,03%); iv) business and professional secrecy (9,77%)<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> [https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/KLJP\\_GI2021-Online\\_2704.pdf](https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/KLJP_GI2021-Online_2704.pdf)

# CSOs push back in trying times

## Public trust is low but not all hope is lost

Recent research conducted by the Fundamental Rights Agency, as quoted by the Public Ombudsman in the 2021 annual report, found that 31% of citizens believe that CSOs always or frequently face governmental pressure, while 33% of them believe that CSOs sometimes face governmental pressure<sup>33</sup>. Only Hungary shows a worse result. This finding is of course very concerning from the civic space perspective. Research conducted in 2019 by the Institute for Social Science found that 30% of citizens believed that CSOs should “always” be included in policy-making processes, while 45% thought this should happen “occasionally”<sup>34</sup>.

However,<sup>35</sup> conducted by the Center for Peace Studies on a representative sample of Croatian citizens yielded less favorable results. Only 28% of participants confirmed their general support for the work of CSOs. However, this level of support exceeded the one received by other political organisations and/or institutions, such as the Government (12%), Parliament (7%), political parties (5%), courts (12%), public prosecutors (12%), as well as other important social actors such as trade unions (15%), media (20%) and welfare system organisations (23%). This data show broader mistrust affecting Croat citizens. Other data from the same indicates that citizens in general are not familiar with the work of “progressive CSOs”; with only 17% identifying at least one of them, the highest percentage being 5%. They also demonstrated a relatively poor familiarity with the work of progressive CSOs, heavily favouring their volunteering over professional work, showing reluctance to fund them from public sources (except the EU funds). Additionally, they favour civil society’s advocacy work on politically less controversial issues, such as those related to combating poverty and aiding children in need compared to those focused on preserving democracy and particularly, protecting rights of migrants, refugees and members of the LGBTQ community.

This data also reflects the impact of direct smear campaigns by highest political officials against specific advocacy-oriented CSOs. For instance, in February 2021, President Zoran Milanović stated that one of the most recognisable feminist organisations in Croatia B.a.b.e. “*has a stupid name*” and

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/download/izvjesce-pucke-pravobraniteljice-za-2021-godinu/?wpdmdl=13454&refresh=63b6d81fee8e01672927263>

<sup>34</sup> <https://gong.hr/2019/03/06/gradanike-o-politici-demokraciji-gongu/>

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.cms.hr/system/publication/pdf/175/NOVI\\_PO\\_ETAK\\_-\\_Podloga\\_za\\_raspravu\\_o\\_novom\\_pristupu\\_pozicioniranju\\_i\\_radu\\_progresivnih\\_ljudsko-prava\\_kih\\_organizacija\\_u\\_Hrvatskoj.pdf](https://www.cms.hr/system/publication/pdf/175/NOVI_PO_ETAK_-_Podloga_za_raspravu_o_novom_pristupu_pozicioniranju_i_radu_progresivnih_ljudsko-prava_kih_organizacija_u_Hrvatskoj.pdf)

it is not working for women facing violence but *“only to make noise”*<sup>36</sup>. Similarly, after Gong reported President Milanović and several of his ministers to the Commission for Preventing Conflict of Interest for their attendance at a basement-located illegal bar that was run by a director of a high-profile public firm (currently the defendant in a high-profile corruption case), during a phase of strict Covid-19 restrictions in September and October 2020, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stated that he is: *“...used to reports being submitted by professional tattletales”*<sup>37</sup>.

The fact that watchdog organisations still enjoy a reasonable amount of public support and influence after such attacks indicate certain robustness of civic space in Croatia and social resilience to authoritarian tendencies.

In order to respond to shrinking civic space, nine watchdog organisations created a consortium supported by Civitates Foundation. Gong is a member of this consortium which in 2022 was coordinated by the Center for Peace Studies and in 2023-2024 (upon renewed funding) will be coordinated by Human Rights House Zagreb. Probably the most prominent activity of this cooperation thus far was an international online conference on civic space held in November<sup>38</sup>. More ambitious activities, including a public campaign aimed at improving the public image of watchdog CSOs (to be coordinated by Gong), are expected in 2023-2024.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/milanovic-napao-babe-imaju-glupo-i-neduhovito-ime-one-su-kao-zaboravljene-glumice/2252578.aspx>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/plenkovic-komentirao-potez-gonga-navikao-sam-na-prijave-profesionalnih-prijavljivaca-15022728>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.cms.hr/en/najave-dogadaja/online-konferencija-borba-protiv-suzavanja-prostora-za-djelovanje-i-stvaranje-poticajnog-okruzenja-za-razvoj-civilnoga-drustva-u-eu>

# Recommendations

## To the government of Croatia

### The regulatory environment for and implementation of civic freedoms

- Adopt key policies to develop the capacities of the sector and protect civic space, the National Strategy for the Creation of an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development and National Program for Protection and Promotion of

### Safe space

- Refrain from smearing, harassing and criminalising civil society and journalists and ensure accountability, via independent investigations, of public officials engaging in these actions;
- Address the issue of strategic lawsuits against public participation targeted at public watchdogs, including by addressing the abuse of legal provisions on defamation and encouraging awareness, taking into account European standards on the protection of journalists.

### The right to participation and dialogue between the sector and governing bodies

- Recognize the social value of all CSOs, including advocacy oriented and critical organisations;
- Restore the previously functional framework of cooperation between CSOs and public authorities, in particular by reviewing the composition of the Council for Civil Society Development to ensure fair representation of civil society organisations. Even more vital is restoring cooperation standards based on open, critical dialogue and consensus-building;
- Appoint competent public servants to key positions in institutions crucial for the civic support ecosystem - namely Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs and National Foundation for Civil Society Development, and ensure their autonomy from political interference
- Improve transparency and capacities of the public administration in all aspects of policy cycle



## **The framework for civic organisations' financial viability and sustainability**

- 🔍 Improve the existing system of financial support taking into account different needs of CSOs;
- 🔍 Ensure transparency and predictability in the process of programming, publishing and conducting tenders and evaluating project proposals;
- 🔍 Simplify the administrative requirements of calls for funding to ensure that the process and implementation of projects run smoothly and that funds are spent justifiably and purposefully;
- 🔍 Improve institutional capacities to avoid breaches of contractual obligations towards beneficiaries in implementation of ESF projects.

## About the contributor

Gong is a Croatian civil society organisation founded in 1997 focused on enhancing democratic processes and institutions as well as developing democratic political culture and encouraging active and responsible participation of citizens in political processes. The organisation works particularly on issues related to the good governance of public and collective property and the protection and promotion of the rule of law, human rights, and solidarity.





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