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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA
FOR THE 50TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

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Status of Human Rights in Croatia for the 50th Session of the Universal Periodic Review

Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of Croatia (Croatia) for the 50th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Background

2. Croatia is a country located in the northwestern region of the Balkan Peninsula and has a population of approximately 3.9 million people.¹ The country is predominantly Christian, with approximately 86.3% identifying as Roman Catholic, 4.4% as Eastern Orthodox, 4% as other, 3.8% as atheist, and 1.5% as Muslim.²

3. Croatia's last review was held on November 10, 2020.³ As a result of the review, Croatia received 224 recommendations, 194 of which it supported.⁴ It was recommended by Spain, and noted by Croatia, that the government:

Take appropriate measures to guarantee women's access to legal and safe abortion in order that, for example, doctors; refusal to perform abortions based on religious beliefs does not limit the right to sexual and reproductive health of women, and that the procedure is covered by the national social security system and/or its costs are affordable for all women, regardless of their socioeconomic situation.⁵

Legal Framework

4. Article 21 of the Constitution of Croatia states that “[e]very human being has the right to life.”⁶

5. Under Article 15 of Law No. 1252- 1979, “[p]regnancy may be terminated up to ten weeks following the date of conception.”⁷ Further, under Article 22:

¹ C. W. Bracewell et al., *Croatia*, BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Croatia> (last updated Apr. 1, 2025).

² *Id.*

³ *Universal Periodic Review – Croatia*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/hr-index> (last visited Apr. 2, 2025).

⁴ *Croatia – Infographic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/HR/InfographicCroatia.pdf>.

⁵ OHCHR, UPR of Croatia (3rd Cycle – 36th Session) Thematic List of Recommendations, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/HR/UPR36_Croatia_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.docx.

⁶ CONST. OF CROATIA art. 21, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Croatia_2013.

⁷ Law No. 1252 – 1978 art. 15, <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/provision/croatias-abortion-provisions/>.

After 10 weeks have elapsed since the date of conception, the first level commission may authorize a pregnancy termination, with the consent of or on application by the pregnant woman, in the following cases:

- where, on the basis of medical indications, it is established that there is no other way to save the life or avert damage to the health of the woman during pregnancy, childbirth, or the puerperium,
- where, on the basis of medical indications and medical knowledge, it may be supposed that the child will be born with severe congenital physical or mental defects,
- where conception occurred as a result of rape, intercourse with an incompetent person, intercourse through abuse of authority, intercourse with a child, or incest.⁸

6. Croatia’s Law on Medical Practice states that:

For the sake of their ethical, religious or moral beliefs a doctor has the right to file CO [conscientious objection] and refuse to perform diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of the patient, if it does not conflict with the rules of profession and if this does not cause permanent damage to the health or the patient’s life. One should promptly inform the patient on such decision and refer them to other appropriate medical experts.⁹

7. Additionally, Croatia is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).¹⁰ Under Article 6 of the ICCPR, “[e]very human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life.”¹¹ Also, under Article 19 of the ICCPR, “[e]veryone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.”¹²

8. Croatia also has a responsibility to uphold pro-life principles enshrined in other international agreements such as the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development.

Abortion

9. Croatia is an overwhelmingly Catholic nation. Catholics are called upon to protect the most vulnerable among us, and no one is more vulnerable than a preborn baby. Paragraph 2270 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “[h]uman life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence,

⁸ *Id.* art. 22.

⁹ Amir Hodžić, *A Look at Conscientious Objection in Croatia*, CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE (Apr. 25, 2016), <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/resource-library/a-look-at-conscientious-objection-in-croatia/>.

¹⁰ *Ratification Status for Croatia*, OHCHR, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=43&Lang=EN (last visited Apr. 2, 2025).

¹¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 8, *adopted* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> [hereinafter ICCPR].

¹² *Id.* art. 19.

a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person - among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.”¹³ Croatia’s population has shown to largely support pro-life principles. In fact, current surveys show that more than half of the gynecologists in Croatia refuse to carry out abortions as a matter of conscience.¹⁴ Additionally, in 2022, thousands of pro-life citizens attended a March for Life rally in Croatia’s capital, Zagreb.¹⁵

10. Even though abortion is often referred to as “reproductive health,” nothing could be farther from the truth. No procedure that involves the deliberate killing of an innocent life could ever be called healthcare. No healthcare worker should be required to participate in this procedure, especially when it violates their religious beliefs and is in contravention of numerous fundamental human rights documents. Healthcare workers have a responsibility to protect human life, not kill. Since the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development, U.N. Member States have had an affirmative commitment to “reduce the recourse to abortion”¹⁶ and to “take appropriate steps to help women avoid abortion, which in no case should be promoted as a method of family planning.”¹⁷ If abortion truly is healthcare, why would the 1994 Cairo Conference of Population and Development call for the reducing “recourse to abortion” and why would Croatia feel the need to provide protections for conscientious objections? The answer to this question is simple. It is because abortion is not healthcare. In fact, permitting abortion, and at the same time, providing for conscientious objection is not only inherently contradictory, but it implicitly recognizes that abortion is an act that offends the conscience.

11. While it is good that Croatia has protections for conscientious objectors, we are concerned about the provision that permits abortion beyond ten weeks in cases where “it may be supposed that the child will be born with severe congenital physical or mental defects.”¹⁸ This means that a preborn baby can be killed in the womb because of an illness. Such a provision contravenes the UDHR, which recognizes the “inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”¹⁹ Note that the UDHR says “all members of the human family” not just healthy members. A preborn baby still has rights even if the preborn baby has an illness.

12. Further, abortion not only violates the religious beliefs of many Croatians, but it also contravenes fundamental human rights documents. These documents recognize the dignity of human beings and establish that their rights are inviolable. Again, the UDHR states that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”²⁰ Further, the

¹³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, ¶ 2270, https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_two/chapter_two/article_5/i_respect_for_human_life.html (last visited Apr. 2, 2025).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Thousands Attend March for Life in Croatia*, RIGHT TO LIFE (May 18, 2022), <https://righttolife.org.uk/news/thousands-attend-march-for-life-in-croatia>.

¹⁶ International Conference on Population and Development, *Report of the International Conference on Population and Development*, ¶ 8.25, U.N. Doc. A/CONF/F.171/13.

¹⁷ *Id.* ¶ 7.24.

¹⁸ Law No. 1252 – 1978, *supra* note 7, art. 22.

¹⁹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble, G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, U.N. Doc. A/810 (1948).

²⁰ *Id.*

ICCPR states that “[e]very human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life.”²¹

13. Despite recommendations calling for guaranteeing access to abortion, many U.N. Member States have provisions protecting the lives of preborn babies. While some members of the internal community like to suggest that abortion is an international right and should be guaranteed by all U.N. Member States, many countries disagree on what should be permitted. Out of 193 U.N. Member States, a majority have strict limits on abortions, either outlawing abortion or only permitting it in cases to save the life and health of the mother.²² Further, of the sixty-nine U.N. Member States that permit abortion at varying gestational limits, forty-nine have gestational limits of twelve weeks or less.²³ These restrictions show that those calling for expanding abortion rights are the ones who have the extreme and minority position.

14. Unfortunately, despite much of the population being pro-life, those in support of abortion have put forth measures to prevent people from praying outside of hospitals and abortion clinics. In 2024, abortion activists proposed new measures to change the criminal code that would criminalize the “[v]iolation of a woman’s right to voluntary termination of pregnancy.”²⁴ The measures also state the following:

Whoever interferes with the exercise of the right to voluntary termination of pregnancy by harassing a woman with actions or behaviour that is unwanted, intrusive, offensive, intimidating, or represents mental or physical coercion ...shall be punished with a prison sentence of one to three years.

If passed, this law would lead to the arrests of individuals who are peacefully praying for an end to abortion outside of hospitals and abortion clinics.

15. Abortion activists are not concerned with protecting women’s health; they are only concerned with protecting abortion. This can be seen through Croatia’s recent implementation of a “baby box.” In February 2025, a “baby box” was built into the wall of a convent in Zagreb.²⁵ If a baby is placed in the box, alarms will sound immediately notifying those inside the building that a baby has been placed inside the box.²⁶ The creation of this was the result of an unwanted baby being abandoned in a nearby park.²⁷ While this box allows women who feel they are not able to care for a baby to give the baby up safely, it has been criticized by pro-abortion activists.²⁸ The Women’s Network Croatia called the box “illegal, dangerous and against child’s best interest”²⁹ and one woman stated that “[i]t may sound like a good idea, but

²¹ ICCPR, *supra* note 11, art. 6.

²² *The World’s Abortion Laws*, CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS (June 9, 2023), https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/WALM_2023-v3-Updated_12-20-23.pdf.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Vuk Tesija, *Croatian Women’s Activists Demand Law Reforms Upholding Abortion Rights*, BALKAN INSIGHT (July 9, 2024, 2:56 PM), <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/09/croatian-womens-activists-demand-law-reforms-upholding-abortion-rights/>.

²⁵ Lajla Veselica, *Anti-Abortion Group’s “Baby Box” Stirs Croatia Row*, CBS 19 NEWS (Mar. 25, 2025), https://www.cbs19news.com/anti-abortion-groups-baby-box-stirs-croatia-row/article_4884ed38-40d9-54ff-b4a1-5c7fe262b715.html.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Pro-Life “Baby Box” for Abandoned Babies Outrages Pro-Abortion Groups in Croatia*, SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF UNBORN CHILDREN (Mar. 26, 2025), <https://spuc.org.uk/pro-life-baby-box-for-abandoned-babies-outrages-pro-abortion-groups-in-croatia/>.

ultimately it's again to make women feel bad about abortion, offering an 'alternative.'"³⁰ The notion that a baby would have been better off being killed through an abortion than given up for adoption, or that any option to abortion must be rejected is extremely concerning.

Recommendations:

16. We would like to remind Croatia that its own Constitution states that “[e]very human being has the right to life” and that this right is not only restricted to those individuals who have been born or are healthy. We ask that Croatia uphold protections for all human life, including preborn babies and those with illnesses. We also ask that Croatia continue to uphold protections for healthcare workers to abstain from participating in abortion procedures. Croatia has an obligation to provide these protections, as they are enshrined in numerous fundamental human rights documents, as discussed above.

³⁰ *Id.*