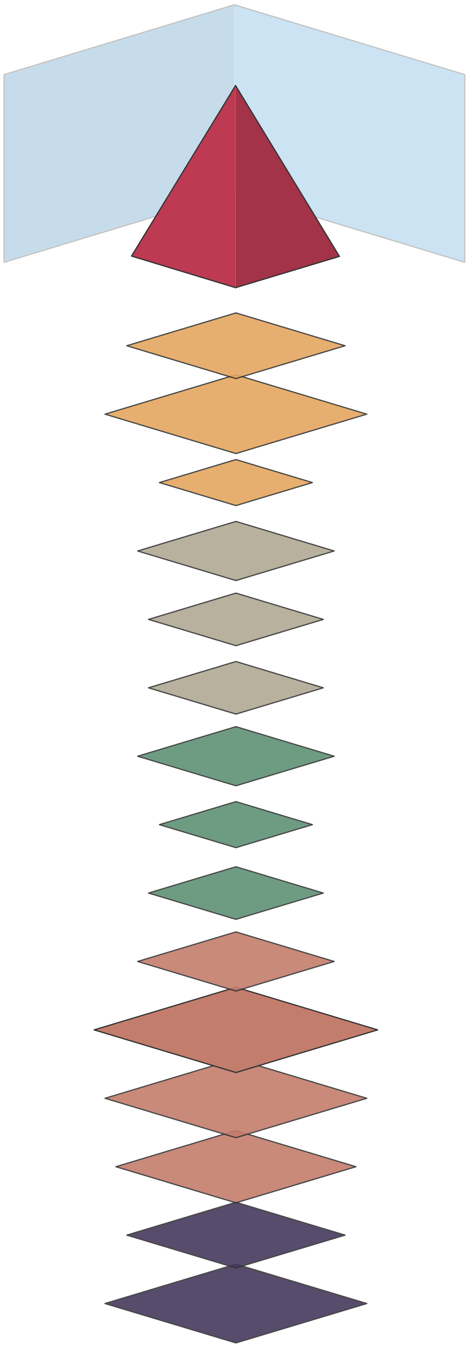
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

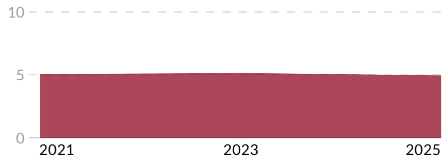
# CROATIA



## 5.02 ↘0.13

## CRIMINALITY SCORE

**101st** of 193 countries ↘13
**17th** of 44 European countries ↘1
**10th** of 17 Central and Eastern European countries -




| CRIMINAL MARKETS | 4.83 | ↘0.07 |
|---|---|---|
| HUMAN TRAFFICKING | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| HUMAN SMUGGLING | 6.00 | ↘0.50 |
| EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING | 3.50 | ↘0.50 |
| ARMS TRAFFICKING | 4.50 | 0.00 |
| TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS | 4.00 | 0.00 |
| ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS | 4.00 | 0.00 |
| FLORA CRIMES | 4.50 | 0.00 |
| FAUNA CRIMES | 3.50 | 0.00 |
| NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES | 4.00 | ↘0.50 |
| HEROIN TRADE | 4.50 | ↘0.50 |
| COCAINE TRADE | 6.50 | 0.00 |
| CANNABIS TRADE | 6.00 | 0.00 |
| SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE | 5.50 | 0.00 |
| CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES | 5.00 | ↗0.50 |
| FINANCIAL CRIMES | 6.00 | ↗0.50 |

| CRIMINAL ACTORS | 5.20 | ↘0.20 |
|---|---|---|
| MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS | 4.00 | 0.00 |
| CRIMINAL NETWORKS | 6.00 | ↘0.50 |
| STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS | 6.00 | 0.00 |
| FOREIGN ACTORS | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS | 5.00 | ↘0.50 |


*This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.*

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Funded by the European Union

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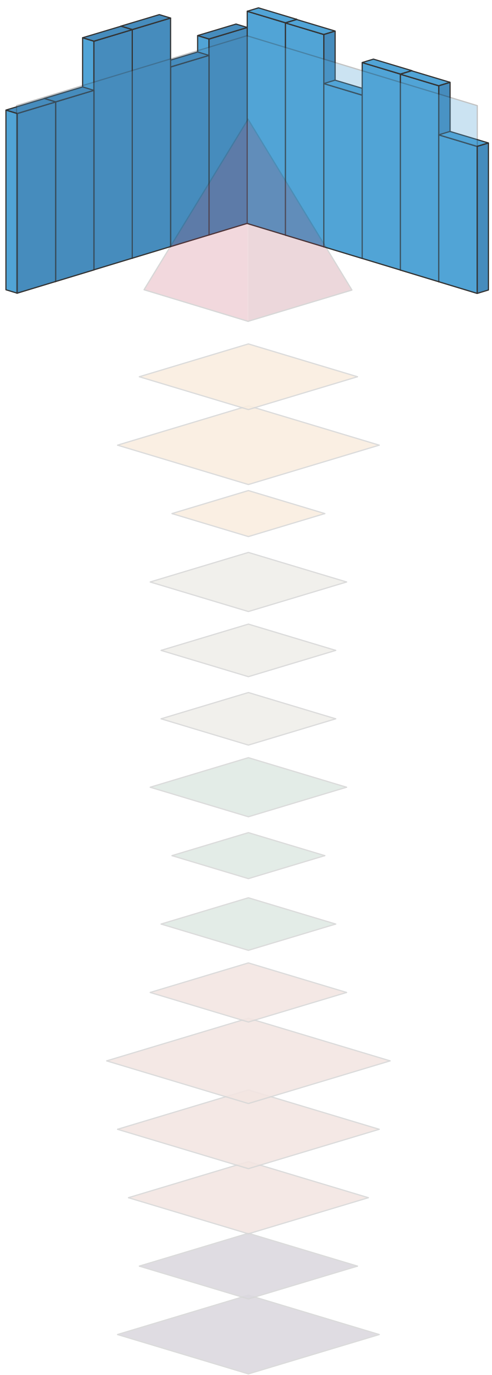
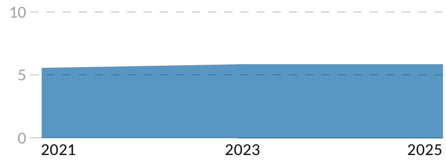


5.92 ↘0.00

## RESILIENCE SCORE

**37th** of 193 countries ↗3
**26th** of 44 European countries -
**4th** of 17 Central and Eastern European countries -




| | | |
|---|---|---|
| POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE | 5.50 | 0.00 |
| GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY | 5.50 | ↘0.50 |
| INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION | 7.00 | 0.00 |
| NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS | 7.00 | 0.00 |
| JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION | 5.50 | 0.00 |
| LAW ENFORCEMENT | 6.00 | 0.00 |
| TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY | 6.50 | 0.00 |
| ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING | 6.50 | 0.00 |
| ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT | 6.00 | 0.00 |
| PREVENTION | 6.00 | ↗0.50 |
| NON-STATE ACTORS | 4.50 | 0.00 |

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# CRIMINALITY

## CRIMINAL MARKETS

### PEOPLE

Croatia serves as a source, transit and destination country for human trafficking, with victims primarily subjected to sexual exploitation, forced labour and coerced begging. Women and girls from the Balkans and Central Europe are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. At the same time, Roma children and unaccompanied foreign minors face heightened risks of forced begging and other forms of coercion. The agricultural sector has historically been a site of labour exploitation, affecting both Croatian and foreign nationals. Croatian traffickers often recruit victims for sex trafficking, forced labour and begging through online platforms and social media. Additionally, the country also functions as a transit route for victims trafficked to Western European destinations, including Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Italy and Austria. Traffickers increasingly utilize the Internet, especially social media, to recruit both minors and adult victims into sex trafficking.

Transnational criminal networks primarily facilitate human smuggling in Croatia; however, domestic actors have increasingly become involved due to economic hardship. Croatia serves as a key transit hub for irregular migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Algeria and Morocco travelling along the Balkan route. Following Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area in 2023, illegal border crossings initially surged but declined in 2024 due to enhanced border measures. The country has become a focal point for smugglers who recruit individuals in camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina to facilitate their entry into Western Europe. Social media is playing an increasingly significant role in connecting smugglers with migrants. In response, Croatian law enforcement has intensified operations against smuggling networks, resulting in a considerable rise in the number of arrests in recent years.

Extortion and protection racketeering are typically perpetrated by small, localized groups rather than by well-structured organized crime syndicates. An exception to this trend is the 'Pridošlice i zaštitari' group, which is reportedly involved in extortion activities targeting businesses such as cafes, bars and pubs. This group is notorious for employing violent tactics, including the use of weapons and explosives. In recent years, there has been a decline in reported extortion cases; however, notable incidents, such as the arrest of seven men for extorting a business owner in Sisak, underscore the ongoing presence of these crimes.

### TRADE

Arms trafficking in Croatia primarily involves the movement of firearms across the Balkans, with the country serving as both a transit corridor and a limited domestic distribution point. While the scale of trafficking appears constrained by Croatia's robust legal framework, weapons sourced from the Balkans are smuggled into Western Europe. Additionally, Croatian-manufactured arms have been identified in international trafficking cases, including an operation that uncovered Croatian weapons trafficked to South America. Authorities suspect that the weapons, initially imported legally, underwent modifications before being resold through intermediaries to criminal factions. There are concerns that the ongoing conflict in Ukraine may exacerbate arms trafficking, although no substantial evidence has yet emerged to confirm this trend.

The market for counterfeit goods in Croatia encompasses a diverse array of products, including clothing, cosmetics, electronics, alcohol and pharmaceuticals. Counterfeiting results in financial losses, with the pharmaceutical sector being the most severely impacted. Additionally, illicit tobacco production is prevalent, as evidenced by reports of counterfeit cigarette packaging materials found in Zagreb. Tourist-heavy areas, such as Dubrovnik, serve as hotspots for the sale of counterfeit luxury goods. Despite ongoing enforcement efforts, the demand for counterfeit products remains high, particularly through social media platforms.

Illicit trade in excise goods, particularly tobacco and alcohol, remains a significant issue, although recent trends suggest a decline in black market activity following Croatia's integration into the Schengen Area. The illicit tobacco market is still active, with large-scale seizures continuing to take place. In one notable case, six individuals were indicted for smuggling cigarettes from Dubai into Croatia, evading customs duties and laundering the proceeds through bribery. Despite advancements in traceability and enforcement, the illicit trade in excise goods continues to result in substantial financial losses for the government.

### ENVIRONMENT

Croatia serves as both a source and transit country in the illegal timber trade. Reports indicate that an active 'wood mafia' operates within the country, trafficking timber to neighbouring states. Some legitimate companies are suspected of participating in transnational timber trafficking, taking advantage of weak enforcement at ports of entry. In certain instances, illicit timber operations are linked to money laundering activities. Additionally, private forest owners have reported an increase in timber thefts, which has been exacerbated by the rising demand for firewood following the onset of the war in Ukraine. Investigations have revealed schemes involving European traders who use Croatian companies to circumvent EU timber regulations and import restricted wood from Myanmar.

Croatia serves as both a source and transit country for wildlife trafficking. The country plays a role in the illicit reptile trade, with live tortoises among the species smuggled to various destinations across Europe. Furthermore, illegal bird hunting remains prevalent, with poached birds being trafficked through Croatia into Italy for sale on the black market. Marine species are also targeted; this is evidenced by the indictment of a criminal group responsible for the illicit harvesting and trading of large quantities of sea cucumbers, sea urchins and date shells, which has resulted in both financial and environmental damage.

Non-renewable resource crimes in Croatia primarily involve fraud related to gas and oil. Reports indicate the existence of a grey market for gas cylinders, as well as illegal imports of hydrofluorocarbons through Croatia into the EU. Corruption scandals have also surfaced in the energy sector. Although the direct involvement of organized crime in non-renewable resource crimes remains uncertain, regional dynamics suggest a potential connection to illicit activities in the extraction and trade of these resources.

### DRUGS

The heroin trade in Croatia is facilitated by Balkan drug networks, with heroin primarily smuggled from Afghanistan through Türkiye via land routes. Additionally, heroin enters Croatia by sea, with the most common points of origin being ports in Iran, Pakistan and Türkiye. Despite the presence of Balkan drug gangs and their operations within the country, Croatia plays a comparably smaller role in heroin smuggling than its neighbouring countries and has a relatively low number of heroin users.

Cocaine trafficking through Croatia has surged in recent years, with organized crime groups exploiting maritime routes to smuggle cocaine from South America into European markets. The country has experienced record cocaine seizures as well as high-profile arrests, including that of a prominent Balkan trafficker, underscoring Croatia's expanding role in regional cocaine distribution. Regarding local consumption, while cocaine use is primarily concentrated in large cities, such as Zagreb, Split and Dubrovnik, recent wastewater analyses and surveys indicate a rise in local cocaine consumption.

Cannabis remains the most widely consumed and seized illicit drug in Croatia. Domestic cultivation is limited but persistent, with authorities increasingly dismantling indoor grow operations. Most cannabis entering the country originates from Albania and is trafficked through Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Large-scale smuggling operations involving hundreds of kilograms of cannabis have been uncovered, often linked to transnational criminal networks.

Synthetic drug trafficking in Croatia primarily involves amphetamines, MDMA and new psychoactive substances. Although domestic production is minimal, small-scale laboratories have been identified and dismantled in recent years. Synthetic drugs are predominantly sourced from Western Europe and Asia. Reports indicate a rising incidence of fentanyl-related cases.

### CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crime in Croatia has been on the rise, with malware being the most prevalent form. High profile cyberattacks have targeted both public institutions and private companies, including ransomware incidents that have impacted the financial and healthcare sectors. Additionally, cryptocurrency fraud has also emerged, with the largest known case involving a company that defrauded over 250 investors of €18.5 million. A recent report indicates that Croatian businesses are largely unprepared to combat cyber threats, highlighting vulnerabilities in the country's digital security framework.

### FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes, including fraud, embezzlement, tax evasion and money laundering, continue to pose significant challenges in Croatia. The country's adoption of the euro in 2023 has coincided with a rise in the circulation of counterfeit currency. Organized crime groups exploit shell companies and internet banking fraud schemes to launder illicit proceeds. Corruption scandals have implicated high-ranking officials, notably the dismissal of the Minister of Health in 2024 following an EU-led investigation into bribery and fraud within the healthcare sector. These incidents highlight ongoing vulnerabilities in Croatia's financial regulatory framework and enforcement mechanisms.

## CRIMINAL ACTORS

Mafia-style groups in Croatia are less organized than those in some neighbouring countries; however, anecdotal evidence indicates that at least 10 significant groups operate within the country. The most prominent among them is the 'Pridošlice i zaštitari' group, which follows a hierarchical structure led by a single boss and two lieutenants. This group primarily engages in extortion activities targeting cafes, bars and pubs, often resorting to violence, including the use of weapons, explosives and bomb threats, to enforce their demands. While the group and its leadership are known to law enforcement, specific details about their operations remain limited. In addition to extortion, some smaller gangs have been linked to arms trafficking, capitalizing on the availability of small arms left over from the Balkan wars.

Criminal networks represent the predominant form of organized crime in Croatia, with limited evidence of large-scale, nationally coordinated structures. These networks are typically small, consisting of five to 10 members, and are highly active in human trafficking, arms trafficking and the drug trade. The human trafficking market within Croatia is fragmented, primarily operated by small domestic networks. Arms trafficking is similarly influenced by both domestic and regional actors, with Croatian networks facilitating the movement of weapons. Croatian networks largely control the heroin trade, although reports indicate that foreign actors also play a significant role.

Corruption remains a significant concern in Croatia, particularly among high-ranking government officials. The country has experienced multiple corruption scandals involving members of the ruling party, with the European Public Prosecutor's Office charging several former officials, including a minister and a deputy minister, for the misuse of EU funds. Reports indicate systemic corruption at the ministerial level, highlighting deficiencies in oversight and regulatory enforcement. Recent notable cases involving the procurement of medical supplies and services through bribery and fraudulent dealings have sparked public outrage and underscored the persistent issue of corruption in public institutions, despite Croatia's membership in the European Union.

Croatia's strategic location along the Balkan route positions it as a hub for foreign criminal groups engaged in human trafficking, drug trafficking and smuggling operations. Foreign actors dominate the human trafficking transit market in Croatia, while domestic networks control the internal market. Official data indicates that more than two-thirds of individuals involved in human smuggling were foreign nationals, primarily from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia, with a growing influx from Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Türkiye, Moldova and even China. These smugglers often maintain regional connections in transit countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. Additionally, foreign criminal actors also play a significant role in Croatia's drug trade. Balkan drug gangs have historically utilized Ottoman-era smuggling routes to transport heroin from Türkiye into Croatia and further into Western Europe. Meanwhile, organized crime groups in the Western Balkans have established direct cocaine trafficking routes from Latin America to Europe, using Croatian ports as entry points. The collaboration between South American cartels and Western Balkan groups has further solidified Croatia's position as a transit hub for cocaine destined for the European market.

The intersection of organized crime and private-sector actors in Croatia primarily manifests through financial crimes, tax evasion and corporate corruption. While most corruption cases involve individuals rather than entire sectors, a key area of concern is the public–private nexus, particularly in state-affiliated industries. Despite increasing scrutiny, enforcement measures against financial crimes remain inconsistent, and private-sector compliance with anti-money laundering regulations is often inadequate. The ongoing risks of illicit financial flows and corporate fraud continue to undermine Croatia's efforts to combat organized crime.

# RESILIENCE

## LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

The political landscape in Croatia remains relatively stable, with the ruling Croatian Democratic Union securing another term in the 2024 parliamentary elections. The party's continued dominance is attributed to its strong emphasis on EU membership and economic stability. However, allegations of corruption and concerns about transparency have accompanied its tenure. Croatia has prioritized combating organized crime due to its strategic position in south-eastern Europe, a region that remains economically and socially underdeveloped compared to the rest of the continent. Nonetheless, domestic governance issues persist, particularly regarding the excessive discretion granted to local officials, which has raised concerns over state capture at the local level. Although civil society organizations report no deterioration in their status, they have also noted minimal progress in strengthening governance structures.

Government transparency and accountability efforts have yielded mixed results. Croatia has centralized its anti-corruption initiatives under the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organized Crime (USKOK), which collaborates with the National Police Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organized Crime. Other institutions, such as the State Audit Office and the Independent Anti-Corruption Sector within the Ministry of Justice, also contribute to preventing corruption. However, the effectiveness of these entities has been called into question, as corruption scandals involving high-ranking officials remain widespread. Additionally, media investigations have uncovered corruption allegations against 12 former ministers, highlighting ongoing challenges in combating corruption.

Internationally, Croatia has enhanced its cooperation in combating transnational organized crime. The country actively participates in initiatives led by the UNODC. Croatia is also involved in regional partnerships, including the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre, and has strengthened its ties with INTERPOL and Europol. In 2023, Croatia signed a memorandum with the US to bolster cybercrime suppression, resulting in the establishment of a specialized unit focused on addressing cyber threats. Additionally, the country is in the process of joining the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), with technical reviews on its statistical policies already completed.

Legislatively, Croatia has aligned its legal framework criminalizing human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking and environmental crimes with international conventions and EU directives, and in many cases even stricter than international standards. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, and there are challenges in effectively implementing anti-human trafficking policies. The country has established a national referral system for victims of trafficking and has ratified key international conventions. Nevertheless, Croatia does not fully meet the minimum standards for trafficking prevention, despite its efforts to improve.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The Croatian judicial system faces ongoing challenges, particularly in maintaining public trust. Recent reports and surveys indicate that only a quarter of Croatian citizens view judicial independence positively. Corruption within the judiciary has been a persistent issue, with judges facing investigations and prosecutions for bribery. Although reforms have been proposed, including revisions to the Criminal Procedure Code, progress remains slow. Detention conditions have also come under scrutiny, especially regarding the treatment of migrants. Recent reports have highlighted the mistreatment of migrants in detention centres, raising concerns about compliance with international human rights standards.

Law enforcement efforts to combat organized crime are supported by specialized agencies such as USKOK and the Security and Intelligence Agency. Croatia collaborates extensively with foreign security and intelligence services, as well as international organizations, to enhance intelligence sharing and enforcement. However, USKOK remains underfunded, and many investigations launched by the agency fail to reach timely conclusions. Furthermore, internal reports have exposed illegal and irregular practices within the Military Security Intelligence Agency, further eroding public confidence in law enforcement institutions. Despite these challenges, Croatia's police force has maintained a high success rate in resolving criminal cases. The rise in drug seizures and arrests of human smugglers demonstrates a proactive approach to combating organized crime. However, a recent report alleged that Croatian police engaged in illegal pushbacks of migrants along the Bosnia and Herzegovina border, highlighting concerns over certain border security operations.

Croatia's territorial integrity continues to be a concern due to its porous borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. The country acts as a transit hub for drug trafficking, particularly heroin smuggling along the Balkan route. In response to heightened migratory pressures, Slovenia reinstated border controls with Croatia in 2023, further complicating regional mobility and security.

## ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Croatia has made significant strides in strengthening its anti-money laundering framework. In 2023, the country enacted amendments to its Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Prevention Act, which lowered the cash transaction reporting threshold and expanded the definitions of terrorism financing. The Anti-Money Laundering Office, located within the Ministry of Finance, has enhanced its financial intelligence capabilities and increased collaboration with international financial oversight bodies. Other reforms include improved customer due diligence, stricter regulations for third-party reliance and correspondent banking, as well as improved beneficial ownership registers. Additionally, measures for virtual asset service providers, a cash disclosure system and stronger international cooperation powers were also introduced. However, Croatia has recently come under heightened scrutiny from the Financial Action Task Force and has found itself on the organization's 'grey list'.

Economic regulatory challenges continue to persist, particularly due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and judicial bottlenecks. Although Croatia has enacted reforms to streamline business registration processes, regulatory burdens remain significant and structural reforms have been slow to develop. The country's ongoing accession process with the OECD is anticipated to yield further regulatory enhancements, although progress has been incremental.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Croatia has established institutional mechanisms to support victims and witnesses, including the Victim and Witness Support Services and a dedicated committee to monitor these programs. However, the effectiveness of witness protection measures is still limited, with reports of witness intimidation in sensitive cases. Additionally, civil society organizations involved in victim support cite inadequate government funding as a persistent challenge. Although the country has increased funding for shelters and victim services, the screening mechanisms for identifying trafficking victims remain inadequate.

Efforts to combat organized crime encompass national teams focused on addressing domestic violence and human trafficking, along with public awareness campaigns targeting tourists, the general public, students and the Roma community. Furthermore, labour inspectors focused on sectors like agriculture, construction and services, uncovering issues with contracts, permits and wages. As for drug abuse victims, a national strategy is in place aiming to reduce demand and availability of illegal substances, improve public health and safety, and minimize the harms of addiction. Ongoing education activities support experts in developing and implementing prevention programs. Furthermore, collaborative prevention initiatives are in place among various departments, including those responsible for prison treatment, social services, police, probation offices and NGOs.

Non-state actors, including media and civil society groups, are facing constraints. Croatia is one of the leading EU countries in strategic lawsuits against public participation, often targeting journalists who report on corruption and organized crime. Reports indicate that journalists investigating high-profile cases have been subjected to harassment, cyberattacks and even physical threats. The country's public broadcaster has faced political pressure, and new amendments to the Criminal Law Act could further restrict investigative journalism by criminalizing the disclosure of information related to ongoing investigations.

*This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.*