

Fact sheet: Croatia

Country report on Media and Migration

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July 2019



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To cite this article:

CC BY Fact sheet Croatia. Report on media and migration by
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on behalf of COMMIT for the EU project New Neighbours.

About the project

“New Neighbours” aims to highlight the positive social, cultural and economic contributions made by migrants and refugees throughout communities across Europe. The objectives are to facilitate direct participation in public and community media production and to create new intercultural media spaces, in order to raise awareness and to promote understanding between locals and newcomers. This will be achieved through various activities implemented by the project partners, including a new series of TV documentaries produced 2019 by public service broadcasters in nine European countries, as well as social media-based campaigns, media skills trainings, research and focus group work, expert meetings and other events. In addition, New Neighbours will build stronger links between media and civil society organisations, which will improve the flow of information and can help to deliver the message to a wider and more diverse audience. The project is funded by the European Commission and coordinated by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Partners of EBU are CMFE - Community Media Forum Europe, MDI - Media Diversity Institute, COSPE - Cooperation for the development of emerging countries and COMMIT - Community Media Institute for training, research and consulting. Project term is January 2019 to December 2020. Further information can be found on the [New Neighbours website](#).

About the author

[Martina Prokl Predragović](#) works as communications officer at Jesuit Refugee Service JRS in Croatia. She is developing JRS communications and advocacy policies, strategy and supporting tools. In this context she was also creating and implementing a national raising awareness campaign for the integration of refugees “Strangers yesterday, neighbours today”. Before she worked as a radio Journalist at the Croatian Broadcasting Corporation HRT. She has a Master’s degree in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology and Comparative Literature from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb.

On behalf of COMMIT, Martina Prokl Predragović participates in the New Neighbours project as the local researcher and focus group moderator for Croatia.

Fact sheet: Media and Migration in Croatia

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Migration and border regime in Croatia

Croatia is the youngest member of the EU. The country joined the European Union in July 2013 following a referendum in which 66% voted in favour. It is a state with a turbulent recent history that fought a war of independence against Yugoslavia in the years 1991-95.¹ In order to also join the passport-free Schengen area, Croatia has to demonstrate that it is able to effectively manage the external border of the bloc. This is a very sensitive issue, in particular since Europe's so-called "migration or refugee crisis" of 2015.

After the events of 2015, the Croatian government now is keen to show that the border regime is working and the country is prepared to be admitted to the EU's area of freedom of movement.² Croatia has 1,300 kilometers of border with non-EU countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, making it challenging to control immigration. If Croatia does join the Schengen area, it will be in the front line of this long external EU border, shared by all the countries of the neighbouring region in the southeast.³

Recently, the number of migrants arriving in Bosnia hoping to cross the border into Croatia, and thus into the EU, has increased significantly.⁴ At the same time, there are more and more reports and accusations concerning police violence on Croatia's border with Bosnia, the new point of entry on the Balkan's migratory route. This is where thousands of people from Pakistan, Iraq, Iran and North Africa are waiting to get into Croatia and then into Slovenia, which is already part of the Schengen area.

A number of non-governmental organizations have reported gratuitous violence and humiliating treatment by Croatian border guards, including Amnesty International, which in March 2019 published the report [Pushed to the edge. Violence and abuse against refugees and migrants along Balkan Route](#), accusing the EU of being complicit with the police abuses. And media reports show migrants - including children - with wounds they say were inflicted by border police - see: [InfoMigrants Fact check: Push-backs from Croatia to Bosnia](#).

¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/eu-country-briefing-croatia>

² <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-croatia/eus-juncker-backs-croatia-joining-open-border-schengen-zone-idUKKCN1T81EJ>

³ <https://www.etiasvisa.com/etias-news/croatia-schengen-area>

⁴ <https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/croatia-approaches-the-schengen-area.html>

“Croatia is playing at being the guardian of the Schengen border, basically to show the EU that we are ready to be admitted, because a lot of money has been spent on this and because we are being closely watched. Croatia is a pawn in the system. And at times a pretty brutal pawn,” explains Drago Župarić-Ilić, a Croatian sociologist specializing in asylum and migration at Zagreb University (see: El Pais on May 3, 2019).⁵

But Zagreb insists to have done the “homework”. “We have shown very clearly that we are up to the job,” says Terezija Gras, Secretary of State in Croatia’s Interior Ministry. “We have one of the strongest border police forces in Europe. We are capable of protecting what is not only the border of Croatia but also the EU. We have done a lot since the 2015 crisis.”⁶

The Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic reiterated her support for the tough line of border control after foreign media had reported her admitting the use of violence by Croatian border police forces against migrants. “Of course, some violence is needed when you implement pushback, but you have to see what kind of terrain there is,” she said to SRF on 9 July 2019.⁷

The Croatian Ombudsman Lora Vidović has sent a letter to the competent institutions requesting to conduct appropriate, efficient and independent investigation of alleged systematic and unlawful actions by the Croatian police against migrants. At the end of March 2019 she had received a complaint from an anonymous border policeman. It should therefore be established whether his allegations are grounded. While Croatian and international organizations and media have been warning against these practices for some time now, this is the first public confirmation of such conduct coming from police officials on the ground. As there was no institutional reaction, the Ombudswoman addressed the public and published the [complaint on the website](#) (also in English).

“There was talk of a sense of identification between the Croatian citizens, who had suffered as refugees as well, and those fleeing the wars in the Middle East,” writes Francesca Rolandi in an article at OBC Transeuropa on June 28, 2018. But at the latest with the change of government in 2016, the first instances of solidarity have given way to rejection and violence. “From 2015 onwards, Croatian policies have generally reflected the orientations of European politics, moving from the desire to ensure a safe transition to Germany to the criminalisation of solidarity. ... Being collaborative vis-à-vis Brussels, Zagreb lends itself to playing its role as a protector, even through the dirty job, of the EU’s external borders and policies - policies of closure and scaremongering that seem to unequivocally lead to racism and bloodshed.”⁸

⁵ https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/05/02/inenglish/1556793573_506983.html

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/17/c_138232280.htm

⁸ <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Croatia/Croatia-refugees-and-responsibilities-188573>

Situation and public perception of refugees in Croatia

There are currently about 250 asylum seekers in the Republic of Croatia, and from 2006 until July 2019 about 800 people have been granted asylum, with about 200 of them leaving Croatia so that around 600 of them live in the country.

After the “refugee crisis” (September 2015 to April 2016), both the structure and the needs of refugees in Croatia have changed considerably. Before predominantly male refugees were at the reception centers (in Zagreb and Kutina). Today there are about 60% of vulnerable groups including women, children and unaccompanied minors. Furthermore, the changes have also occurred in the perception of Croatia itself as a living environment – from a transit country to a state where people intend to stay.

“The fact is that unlike Western countries with a long history of immigration, Croatia has had no similar experience. For many Croats, it feels like this is the first time they are facing so many different cultures at once. Unfortunately, and Croatia is not the exception, fear has become a dominant response to the reality of global migrations. In the background, of course, is the growing trend of distorted nationalism, fear of identity change, and many other phenomena, so typical of Europe today,” says Tvrtko Barun SJ, the director of the NGO Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Southeast Europe.

Church traditionally plays an important role in the Croatian society, but has decided to ‘sit this one out’ when it comes to refugees. However, NGOs like JRS in Croatia believe that supporting refugees should be a sign of the times for the church. The organization therefore strives to raise awareness and sensitize the Catholic community in Croatia for the needs and rights of refugees at all levels. Considering the standpoints and opinions of an average Catholic, priest or bishop in Croatia, this is a very big challenge.

Integration challenges

Refugees in Croatia have been confronted with a systemic lack of availability of Croatian language learning courses, as reported on the [European Web Site on Integration](#). For this reason, many recognized refugees could not start any courses even years after their refugee status was granted. In recent years, however, some small progress has been made in this regard. For example, because the Centre for Croatian as a Foreign and Second Language at the University of Zagreb and the NGO [Are You Syrious?](#) took the matter into their own hands and jointly initiated a language course for refugees and asylum seekers in early 2018.

The Croatian government also began to act and in April 2018, the Ministry of Science and Education announced a public tender for educational institutions, foreign language schools and open universities to provide Croatian language courses for refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection in twelve cities. In addition, the Jesuit Refugee Service in Croatia also organizes language courses for people seeking asylum or under subsidiary protection.⁹

Croatia is more a country of emigration and not a traditional immigration country. The departures are larger than the arrivals and the presence of immigrants in the country is still very limited. The issue of social integration of immigrants is thus a relatively new major challenge for the public administration. The central state administration has to face this challenge as well as local and regional governments and other public services, whose cooperation and coordination are essential for a successful path and implementation of integration strategies.¹⁰

In this question, all actors in different areas of the public sector are called upon to contribute to finding answers and solutions to the challenges involved, such as reception, education, employment, social and health care and general inclusion into Croatian society. The phenomenon also requires consideration and analysis of administrative difficulties and practical adaptation of public administration to new migration-related tasks, with the aim of developing a clear migration and integration policy. The challenges of migration and integration for public administration were discussed in February 2019 at the Academy of Sciences level, for the first time ever in Croatia. However, the media did not follow the topic.¹¹

Public discourse and media coverage of migrants and refugees

“Population of refugees and migrants was and still is quite low in Croatia; even though the path of refugees through Croatia and events that happened afterwards in Europe left an effect on public and citizens. Apart from that, Croatia as an EU member state has an obligation to accept refugees through relocation and resettlement program, what is something talked about in public and among politicians - so, attitudes towards the population of migrants and refugees is a subject to change,” states the 2018 published report “The Wages of Fear: Attitudes Towards Refugees and Migrants in Croatia”.¹²

⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/croatia-more-language-courses-available-for-adult-refugees-and-asylum-seekers>

¹⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/event/zagreb-challenges-of-migration-and-integration-for-public-administration>

¹¹ http://info.hazu.hr/hr/novosti_i_dogadjanja/kalendar_dogadjanja/okrugli-stol--izazovi-migracija-i-integracije-za-javnu-upravu,4862.html

¹² P. Jurlina, T. Vidović, *The Wages of Fear: Attitudes Towards Refugees and Migrants in Croatia*, published by Foundation Institute of Public Affairs/Fundacja Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2018. PDF available for download on the European Website on Integration: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/the-wages-of-fear-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-migrants-in-croatia>

According to this report, the Croatian citizens “are on the border between xenophobic and supportive attitudes towards immigration of foreigners to Croatia: roughly equal numbers express xenophobic and friendly attitudes towards foreign immigrants”.¹³ Although the Croatian media have various approaches to migration, since 2015 the focus of mainstream media has mostly become negative. This is also due to incidents done by migrants or refugees, and certain media report such cases “with high tone of generalization,” the report says.

“The Croatian Journalists’ Association urges journalists and editors to report on the violence, in which asylum seekers are involved, professionally, to check all information before publishing, and to ensure that citizens are not encouraged to prejudices, stereotypes, intolerance and hate,” is stated in a public communication on this issue.¹⁴

In November 2018, more than 700 organizations, individuals, journalists and public figures in Croatia signed an open letter criticising the media’s “one-sided, simplified and ultimately dishonest and unfair reporting” about migrants and refugees. Ivana Peric, one of the signatories and editor of the H-alter website, accused numerous media of violating professional standards and said, “Our society is dominated by fear, resulting from insecurity, economic subjugation and a feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness, and this fear is being instrumentalized politically, with the help of the media, in a disastrous way; it is turning into weapons against refugees and migrants, who are already disempowered and marginalized people.”¹⁵

The International journalists’ association mission and an organization for protecting freedom of speech published a report on hate speech in Croatia. Although Croatia went up on the World Press Freedom Index by five places - from 74th to 69th place in 2018 - there would be a lot of room for improvements, the report says, and the authorities are recommended to conduct thorough investigations in all the unresolved cases of physical attacks on journalists.¹⁶

Of course, there are several positive examples of media stories that address the integration of refugees and migrants in Croatia. However, researchers are observing that the country’s mass media have changed their perspectives in the last few years, for example by increasingly using the term ‘migrant’ instead of the term ‘refugee’.

“There is a noticeable change from a humanitarian rhetoric to a security-oriented rhetoric that mobilises fear to legitimize stronger control of national borders,” analyzes the study “The Refugee Crisis in the Croatian Digital News” from 2018. “The majority of digital news media changed reporting style due to widespread moral panic and the economic incentive to commodify

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/401616/hnd-poziva-medije-da-ne-poticu-predrasude-kada-izvjestavaju-o-nasilju-u-koje-su-umijesani-azilanti>

¹⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/12/croatian-activists-demand-fair-reporting-on-migrants-and-refugees-11-09-2018>

¹⁶ <http://hr.n1.info.com/English/NEWS/a306779/Journalists-Association-Hate-speech-in-Croatia-on-the-rise.html> and <https://www.ecpmf.eu/news/press-releases/croatia-hate-speech-on-the-rise-but-hope-for-change>

audience interest in the topic of the refugee crisis. In contrast, publicly funded news organizations showed that they provide the necessary counter-balance for informing citizens, producing quality content, and ensuring pluralism in the digital news environment.”¹⁷

According to a recent survey on “Challenges of Integrating Refugees into Croatian Society”, more than 90% of Croatian citizens receive information about persons granted asylum through the mass media (print and online news outlets, public and private television and radio). Mass media are the most common source of information in this area, followed by social media, which are used as a source of information about asylum beneficiaries by nearly half of the participants (45.8%). “It has been established that citizens deem the media portrayal of asylum beneficiaries slightly negative,” the study points out. “As for social proximity, the participants are, on average, ready to accept persons granted asylum as their fellow workers or neighbours, where it is obvious that the citizens are, for the time being, not ready for the closest relations with asylum beneficiaries, although nearly 61% would be ready for friendly relations.”¹⁸

Professional institutions would largely leave the role of awareness-raising to the media, and carry out awareness-raising activities mainly in the form of workshops and cultural events, mostly with support from CSOs in Zagreb, the study authors note. “The training of staff members and professionals has also been stressed as extremely important, yet largely non-existent in most institutions, offices and organisations.”¹⁹

¹⁷ P. Bilić, I. Furman, S. Yildirim: *The Refugee Crisis in the Croatian Digital News: Towards a Computational Political Economy of Communication*, 2018. PDF: <https://bib.irb.hr/datoteka/936780.91-511-1-PB.pdf>

¹⁸ D. Ajduković, D. Čorkalo Biruški, M. Gregurović, Jelena Matić Bojić, D. Župarić-Iljić: *Challenges of Integrating Refugees into Croatian Society: Attitudes of Citizens and the Readiness of Local Communities*, published by Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2019. PDF: <https://pravamanjina.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Challenges%20of%20Integrating%20Refugees%20into%20Croatian%20Society.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid.

Good practice examples

Welcomm - Learning tools to build welcoming and inclusive communities

The Welcomm project aims to facilitate the integration of people in need of international protection, particularly those being relocated or resettled. This is achieved through the development of innovative online tools that support pre-departure and post-arrival information, learning and socio-cultural orientation, and the exchange among integration stakeholders. At the heart of the project is the WELCOMM learning and exchange web portal, which is created for use by third-country nationals, integration practitioners and volunteers in host communities. The platform provides language courses, skills and knowledge training modules and a virtual space for the community of practice.

<https://welcomm-europe.eu>

Centar za Mirovne Studije - Center for Peace Studies

The Centre for Peace Studies is a non-governmental and non-profit organization based in Zagreb that promotes non-violence and social change through education, research and activism. All people interested in combating racism, xenophobia and ethnic exclusivity and committed to non-violence, human security and socio-economic justice are invited to participate. The centre often seeks volunteers who support the integration of immigrants, and also organizes various educational workshops and trainings that are free and open to the general public.

<https://www.cms.hr/en>

Taste of Home

Taste of Home started as a culinary-cultural-research project of the Centre for Peace Studies introducing cultures, customs, tastes and cuisines of countries of origin of refugees and migrants. With years, the initiative has come to the establishment of a cooperative, the first social enterprise of its kind in Croatia. The goal is to push economic emancipation of refugees and migrants by using their knowledge, skills and earlier experience while sensitizing environment and society on needs of others through culinary and cultural exchange. The website is jointly operated by the Taste of Home collective and the Centre for Peace Studies, and was developed under the project 'Quality Integration Solutions for Refugees' financially supported by the European Commission.

<https://www.okus-doma.hr/en>

Staze - Jesuit Refugee Service

Since November 2016, the NGO Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) has published the first newspaper intended for refugees and asylum seekers in Croatia. The newspaper, called "Staze" (Paths), is published monthly and aims to strengthen mutual trust and provide information to people who have been forced to leave their homes in search of protection and security. In addition, the project offers asylum seekers and all persons given international protection in Croatia a public forum to express their views and to share their refugee and integration experience with others. Refugees create a platform for refugees, where they can tell their current stories, talk about their hopes for the future and post photos or poems. All contributions are translated into Croatian, English, Arabic, Farsi and other languages to make them accessible to all. The refugees themselves are responsible for the entire process. Most of the newspaper's authors are asylum seekers, integration workers, journalists, volunteers, and JRS staff.

<http://www.jrs.hr/en>

SOL - Center for the Integration of Refugees - Strangers yesterday, neighbours today

At the beginning of 2018, JRS expanded its work in Croatia by opening the first Centre for the Integration of Refugees, called SOL. The center located in Zagreb creates a space where refugees and Croatian citizens come together, thus enabling mutual learning and intercultural understanding. SOL also offers practical trainings and workshops for people with refugee status to strengthen their skills and prepare them to overcome challenges that come with integrating in new cultural and linguistic communities, job market and schools.

From the opening of the Center SOL to the present, JRS has been implementing the campaign "Strangers yesterday, neighbours today". The idea is to familiarize and connect refugees with the local community in order to create a relationship of trust that will be helpful for future coexistence and cooperation. For this purpose, various activities are carried out using food, conversation or music, so that the strangers next door will quickly become the new neighbours.

<https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/croatia-sol-a-new-refugee-integration-centre-in-zagreb>

Christmas Lunch with a Refugee

This event, also organized by JRS Croatia, connects local Zagreb families with refugees. Despite the Christian background, it is not intended to bring local Christian practitioners into contact with Christian refugees, but because Christmas is a cultural and not necessarily religious event for many people. So it's an opportunity to share the joy of festive dining and a sense of community, at a time when it is, according to many studies, much harder to be alone than usual. Hundreds of Croatian families have participated in the initiative over the past three years. The hosted refugees mainly came from Syria, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, all of them hoping to build a new and peaceful life in Croatia.

https://jrseurope.org/news_detail?TN=NEWS-20190122102654&L=EN

Biciklopopravljaona

or BicPop as it is more commonly known, is a volunteers collective based in Zagreb, within Green Action/ Friends of the Earth Croatia NGO. The main idea is the strengthening of social solidarity through free exchange of knowledge and services and the promotion of sustainable transport. The collective offers space, tools and advice on how to repair a bicycle for those who want it. In order to meet the needs of refugees, Biciklopopravljaona collaborates with other NGOs and provides bicycle repair assistance, as well as bicycles are collected and donated on a larger scale.

<https://biciklopopravljaona.zelena-akcija.hr/p/english-about-us.html>

Football Club Zagreb 041

Goal of the Football Club Zagreb 041 is to bring football back to common people and fans and to become the first genuine local community football club in Croatia, which is governed by supporters and sympathizers with a direct-democratic organizational model. The club seeks to combat corruption and clientelism at all levels, as well as any form of discrimination. Throughout the last years the club has been committed to including refugees and migrants into the games or the organization of events to make them feel better accepted by mainstream Croatian society.

<http://www.nkzagreb041.hr>

Society of Africans in Croatia - DAH

DAH is the first migrant society in Croatia. Its mission is to bring together all Africans and friends of Africans living in the Republic of Croatia and to promote social cohesion among African groups and individuals in the country, in order to prevent people from feeling the effects of isolation, social exclusion and racism.

<https://www.facebook.com/www.dah.hr>

www.newneighbours.eu