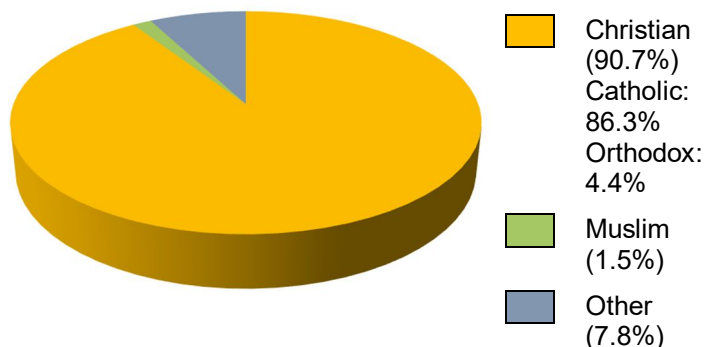


CROATIA



Area: 56,594 km ²	Population¹: 4.2 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Croatian
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Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual situation.

The Republic of Croatia is situated in the south-eastern part of Europe, surrounded by Alps in the west and the Adriatic Sea in the south. It borders Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Serbia and Montenegro. Croatia is the youngest member of the EU. Croatia is inhabited by the following ethnic groups: Croats 90.4%, Serbs 4.4%, Bosniacs 0.7%, Italians 0.4%, Albanians 0.4%, Hungarians 0.3%, Others 3.4%. (2011 Census).

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion.² All religious communities are equal under the law. There is no official state religion. Religious communities are free to publicly conduct religious services, operate schools and charitable organizations. A group needs at least 500 members and five years of registered operation to be recognized as a religious community.

The Croatian state signed separate agreements with religious communities.³ These agreements regulate specific issues, such as the amount of state subsidy for employees of the various communities, their eligibility for state pensions, state support for the upkeep and renovation of religious objects, access for chaplains to prisons, military and state institutions, special food requirements for Adventists and Muslims, and provision for paid leave for Muslims for religious festivals which are not state holidays. Marriages conducted by the religious communities having agreements with the state are officially recognized and eliminate the need to register the marriages in the civil registry office. Public schools allow religious teaching in cooperation with religious communities, who have agreements with the state, but attendance is optional. Religion classes are organised widely in public elementary and secondary schools. In the primary school about 90 percent of all children frequent Catholic religious instruction. This is the case in 65 percent of High Schools (the alternative is teaching of ethics).

Non-registered religious communities cannot conduct religious education in schools or access state funds in support of religious activities.

There are currently 52 registered religious communities⁴ including the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Christian Adventist Church, the Church of God, the Church of Christ, the Pentecostal Church, the Evangelical Church, the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia, the Croatian Old Catholic Church, the Islamic Community of Croatia, the Reformed Christian Church, the Union of Baptist Churches, the Seventh-

day Adventist Reform Movement, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ, the Church of the Full Gospel, the Word of Life Alliance of Churches, the Protestant Reformed Christian Church and Bet Israel.

Public holidays in Croatia also include Catholic religious holidays, but other believers are legally allowed to celebrate other major religious holidays.

The Catholic Church is the dominant religious community. The government recognized its special historical and cultural role and social position by signing four agreements of mutual interest with the Holy See⁵ between 1996 and 1998. These agreements allow state financing for salaries and pensions for certain religious officials through government-managed pension and health funds. They also regulate public school catechisms and military chaplains. The other 16 religious groups which have agreements with the state may offer religious education in schools.

There are 17 ecclesiastical circumscriptions and 1,598 parishes in Croatia. There are currently 25 bishops, 2,343 priests and 3,711 religious.⁶

Laudato TV, the first Catholic television channel in Croatia, was launched on 25th December 2015. There are two catholic radio stations, many weekly and monthly magazines (no daily). There are many catholic professional associations, but generally of a low organizational level. The number of vocations for the priesthood and male religious life is relatively stable; the female vocations are decreasing. The role of lay people has increased almost instantly after the introduction of religious instruction in the schools. The clergy and laity are united against secularism.

Incidents

In 2013 the Catholic Church objected to the new school curriculum on health education in primary and secondary schools, specifically sections dealing with sexual health and same-sex relationships. The Constitutional Court suspended the program, arguing that the government failed to consult with parents on the curriculum.

A national referendum was held in Croatia on the inclusion in the country's constitution of the definition of marriage as a union between a woman and a man. A total of 66 percent of the voters supported the amendment despite enormous pressure from the government, the press and homosexual activists to reject it. Public supporters of traditional marriage have been subjected to intimidation and labeling as 'haters, fascists and bigots'. Christian believers in traditional marriage have been portrayed by mainstream media as uneducated and primitive.

The Catholic Church and the other most influential religious communities in Croatia – Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Baptists and the Jewish community Bet Israel - supported the referendum and invited the believers to vote in order to "secure a constitutional protection of marriage". In a letter read in Catholic churches across the country, Cardinal Josip Bozanic, Archbishop of Zagreb, said: "Marriage is the only union enabling procreation."

In July 2014 the Croatian parliament passed a law allowing same-sex civil unions, giving same-sex couples equal rights with regard to inheritance, social benefits, and taxation but excluded the right to adopt.

About 500 people responded to a call by secularist NGOs by demonstrating in Zagreb and Osijek, calling on the government to cancel agreements with the Holy See. The protesters said such agreements represent a financial burden for Croatia.⁷

Pope Francis proposed the establishment of a joint commission composed of representatives of the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church in order to consider the role of Cardinal Stepinac during the Second World War. Archbishop Marin Barišić of Split-Makarska stated that the canonization of Blessed Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac has not been called into question, regardless of

the objections voiced by the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose delegation visited Pope Francis on January 2016.⁸ The commission's goal is to avoid causing any further divisions between Catholics and Orthodox faithful. The last meeting between the two churches took place in 2002 in Osijek.⁹

Serbian Orthodox Church representatives reported fewer incidents of vandalism than in previous years.

The government announced plans to provide compensation for the nationalization of Chevra Kadisha property, which had been seized from the Jewish community during World War II. Croatia's Jewish communities had submitted claims for 135 communal properties under Croatia's 1996 restitution law of which 15 non-cemetery properties were returned.¹⁰ According to the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia, the country's Jews number between 2,000 and 2,500.

In January 2015 the Ministry of Public Administration refused to register the Croatian Orthodox Church in the Registry of Religious Communities, informing the applicant that according to the Religious Communities Commission they must first become an association. The Croatian Orthodox Church filed a complaint with the Administrative Court in Split, which is still not resolved.¹¹ The European Orthodox Church based in Paris (Eglise Orthodoxe d'Europe) established a branch in Croatia on 2nd October, 2013 and called it the Croatian Orthodox Church. Alexander (Ivanov) was ordained as Bishop of Croatia. The European Orthodox Church in Croatia – Croatian Orthodox Church – was entered in the European Union's Register of Transparency.

On 27th April 2016 the Croatian capital hosted a conference of representative of 50 Muslim communities in Europe for the celebration of 100 years of Islam in Croatia.¹²

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

The heritage of long anti-Christianization during Communism bound with modern materialism left its traces in Croatia. Although the vast majority of the population is Catholic, there is a strong liberal and anti-clerical tendency present among the once privileged class of state employees and some intellectuals. After the arrival of democracy, this class became strongly "European oriented", importing liberal ideas, including opposition to Catholicism. Such thinking is present in the media, cultural institutions, and in the educational system. Religious values and motivations are being forced out of the public sphere. Accusations of bigotry are frequently made against those who take a different view. Under the pretense of human rights and Europeanization, aggressive secular humanism is directly challenging Christian philosophy in education.

A country such as Croatia, which for centuries served as *Antemurale Christianitatis* – the bastion of Christendom – and paid the price for this role, is often more aware than other countries about the part Christianity can play in the life of the nation. However, it is also conscious of the tensions and difficulties associated with Christianity and the public square.

Croatia's relations with Muslim and Orthodox worlds are of much significance for the region and with regards to the rest of Europe. Croatia has the potential to be a mediator between the Islamic world and the West and to help avert a clash of civilizations. Croatia's prospects and policies could largely determine whether the neighboring multi-religious society of Bosnia and Herzegovina flourishes or fails.

¹ Croatian Bureau of Statistics

² Articles 14, 17, 39, and 40 of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia

³ Religious Communities Act, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia, Narodne novine* 83, 2002

⁴ Registry of Religious Communities, Ministry of Public Administration

⁵ The Treaty Between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Spiritual Instruction of Catholic Believers Who Are Members of the Armed Forces and Police Services of the Republic of Croatia and The Treaty between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Co-Operation in Education and Culture. Narodne novine (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia - International Contracts),2, 1997.

The Treaty between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Legal Issues. Narodne novine (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia, International Contracts) 3, 1997 and The Treaty between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Economic Issues. Narodne novine (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia, International Contracts) 18, 1998.

⁶ Central Statistical Office of the Church

⁷ The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN

⁸ IKA, Catholic Press Agency

⁹ Interview with Marin Barišić, Archbishop of Split-Makarska in Vecerni list on January 24, 2016

¹⁰ The World Jewish Restitution Organization, WJRO

¹¹ Bonifacije Andrija Skulic, Archbishop of the Croatian Orthodox Church in an interview on Regional TV station on 11 January, 2016 and Croatian Archbishop Alexander, a member of the Holy Synod of the European Orthodox Church based in Paris in an open letter to Arsen Bauk, the Minister of Public Administration.

¹² <http://aboutislam.net/muslim-issues/europe/croatia-marks-100-years-islam-2/>