

Written contribution for the 4th Review of Croatia under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on the situation of human rights by the UN Human Rights Council

Joint submission by the Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia in cooperation with the Ombudswoman for Children, Ombudswoman for Gender Equality and the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities

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The Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia (ORC), as the NHRI accredited with status A under the Paris Principles, prepared this report in cooperation with the Ombudswoman for Children (OC), the Ombudswoman for Gender Equality (OGE) and the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities (OPWD). It is based on the complaints the ombudspersons worked on, fieldwork, research and data gathered from different stakeholders: public authorities, CSOs, trade unions, employers, universities and many others.

I. INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS AND REPORTING PROCESS

1. The Government of the Republic of Croatia (GRC) submitted pending reports under UN human rights treaties, notably the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
2. The Republic of Croatia (RC) has ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.
3. Since 2013, ORC has been recommending that RC become party to the Optional Protocol to CESCR. The analysis of the existence of the preconditions for the ratification of the ICESCR – OP has been foreseen as one of the activities of the Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, with the deadline for implementation set for the final quarter of 2025.
4. OC notes that in relation to the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography ratified in 2002, in its comments on the fifth and sixth periodic reports of RC on the situation of children's rights, the Committee called on RC to fulfil its obligation to submit a report in accordance with the Optional Protocol, which was due by 13 June 2004.
5. OPWD notes that it provides training on the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and human rights model of disability for law enforcement and judicial police as well as civil servants working in the area of EU funds but other state institutions should take a more active role in introducing the human rights model of disability to civil servants more broadly. When it comes to steps taken to counter stereotypes and prejudice through education of civil servants and officials, although Judicial academy introduced training on communication with persons with disabilities interest of the judiciary is low.

II. LEGISLATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

6. After a stall, the National Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and the Suppression of Discrimination 2023 - 2027 was adopted in March 2023. While welcoming this important development, ORC notes that subsequent Action plans were adopted for 2023 and 2025 only.
7. OGE has been warning in a number of reports about the multi-year absence of the National Plan for Gender Equality, which was adopted only in 2023 after a 7-year gap. This absence has led to a negative impact on the society and significantly slowed down progress of achieving gender equality. Given the expiration of the existing Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Plan for Gender Equality for the period until 2024, OGE recommended in March 2025 to promptly develop and adopt a new Action Plan for 2025 in order to avoid another gap in implementing gender equality policy.

8. ORC has been strengthened in terms of staff and the managing structure, reflecting the increase in the mandates, the tasks, the rise in the number of complaints and, more generally, demands and expectations from the public, CSOs and the media who have come to rely on ORC as an expert independent institution in relation to many human rights issues. However, as in the meantime ORC has received new tasks (most recently – as one of the national public authorities authorized to supervise or enforce the respect for obligations under EU law protecting fundamental rights in relation to certain high-risk uses of AI systems) and due to recent recommendations by SPT, regarding the strengthening of ORC's NPM mandate and international organizations (OECD) in relation to its protection of whistle-blowers' mandate, the additional strengthening of its capacities, in particular regarding additional staff and adequate resources will be necessary.

Since the 2020 earthquake, the ORC has been using temporary office space, which is now limiting in terms of the institution's current needs.

There is no timely debate of ORC's Annual Reports, which are reports on the human rights situation in RC; thus, neither the 2023 nor the 2022 annual reports, nor the special report on the impact of COVID pandemic on human rights in RC have still not been discussed in the Parliament's plenary.

Having faced obstacles since 2018 in relation to access to data when investigating allegations of irregularities in the treatment of migrants, in 2024 improvement was recorded.

9. OC notes that the state does not show willingness to strengthen the independence of the OC, even though the independence is only partial, since the Croatian Parliament can dismiss OC and his/her deputies before the end of their mandates if it does not accept his/her annual report. The annual report on the work of OC is also a report on the state of children's rights in the country and, as such, necessarily implies identification of the weaknesses and shortcomings in ensuring of children's rights. The parliamentary majority is sometimes reluctant to listen to such assessments, which consequently affects their attitude towards the Ombudswoman herself. The percentage of declarative acceptance of OC's recommendations ranges from 53% to 64%. Many recommendations are accepted in principle, but their average implementation rate is only 17%. Reports on the work of OC are not included in the agenda of the Parliament in a timely manner, but sometimes with a delay of more than a year.

III. DISCRIMINATION

10. The Antidiscrimination Act (ADA) came into force in 2009, establishing ORC as the central body for the suppression of discrimination, also responsible for complaints handling for 12 out of the 17 discrimination grounds recognized by the ADA.. In the context of ORC's work, since 2009, the largest number of complaints has been received in relation to racial or ethnic discrimination. Within these, the most vulnerable to discrimination are Roma, Serbs and migrants (of various statuses). Additionally, according to the results of the last ORC's periodic survey on the attitudes and perception of inequality and discrimination conducted in 2022, citizens of the RC consider Roma to be the group most exposed to discrimination.
11. Issues faced by the Roma are well recognized in the National Plan for Roma Inclusion from 2021 to 2027 (NPRI). However, the accompanying Action Plans are not ambitious enough; they do not

contain enough measures for the realization of the achieved goals, and the activities listed in them are often the already existing activities of the competent authorities.

12. According to the relative poverty rate, 92.3% of Roma in the Republic of Croatia are poor, while about 70% of Roma minority families live in extreme poverty. Roma still face significant social exclusion, prejudices and obstacles to their education, employment, housing and health protection. As many as 46% still live in spatially isolated and segregated settlements, with much poorer housing conditions and no availability of utility and infrastructural services, nor content suitable for children and youth.
13. Additional challenge relates to segregation in education. According to the survey conducted by ORC in 2023, out of the 24 elementary schools attended by Roma students, 11 had a total of 80 completely segregated Roma classes. Out of the total number of Roma children attending those 24 schools, 36% attend completely segregated classes and 54% classes in which Roma students made up more than 70% of the total number of students. Furthermore, there are still several almost completely segregated elementary schools. At the same time, in some of the schools with segregated classes the total number of Roma students attending them did not exceed the number of the Croatian students. Since 2021 ORC has been recommending that the relevant ministry analyze the situation and draft a desegregation action plan, which is still not implemented. Moreover, according to the data by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, the number of segregated classes and those in which Roma students are overrepresented increased to 85 in the school year 2024/2025. Thus, ORC addressed GRC, urging it to urgently undertake the measures necessary to completely abolish segregated schooling in its entirety.
14. Members of the Serbian national minority/Serbs are exposed to negative sentiments as well as to expressions of intolerance and hatred in the public discourse, which can encourage discrimination and thus have a negative impact on the level of the realization of their rights.
15. Serbs who returned to their pre-war places of residence are still in many cases faced with lack of basic services such as water and electricity.
16. Croatia still does not have a migration or integration policy in place. Applicants for international protection, persons to whom international protection has been granted and migrant workers remain often exposed to prejudice and discrimination, linked to their racial or ethnic origin. There is a lack of systematic integration measures, including in providing language courses, housing and access to health care.
17. In the past several years there has been an increase in the number of work permits issued to migrant workers. Migrant workers' complaints relate to violations of labor rights, and they lack information on available tools and avenues to protect their rights, both related to work and other areas. Additionally, they face obstacles in the access to health care and access to appropriate housing.
18. OC notes that in the field of education, there is a lack of understanding and recognition of discriminatory treatment and practices. Systematic education and continuous training of professionals in the educational system on human rights, children's rights, the prohibition of discrimination and hate speech is needed, as well as systematic teaching of children on these topics at all levels of education. It is necessary to develop mechanisms for monitoring and responding to any form of discrimination within the educational system and to invest additional efforts in preventing educational segregation of Roma students in primary education. Training for representatives of public authorities on human rights and the prohibition of discrimination, ways

of preventing it and providing protection to children, especially vulnerable groups of children (children with developmental disabilities, children of national minorities, children of foreigners and transgender children) is necessary as well.

IV. HATE SPEECH, HATE CRIME

19. Various statements stirring up hatred appear online, especially in the social-media, but also in articles in some of the media outlets and in the readers' comments below them, which are often directed towards Roma, Serbs and migrants. At the same time, statements by public figures, have a significant impact on the general population and therefore ORC continuously points out the responsibility of public figures, members of parliament and other high level officials, given their speech reaches a larger number of people.
20. Hate speech is defined by the Criminal Code (Art. 325). E.g. in 2024 MoI recorded 21 offences from Art. 325 of the Criminal Code, and 23 in 2023.
21. As for online hate speech, the Law on Electronic Media adopted in 2021 introduced the responsibility of the provider of the electronic publication prescribed for the entire content published in the electronic publication, including content generated by users if they fail to register the user or if the user is not warned in a clear and easily visible way about the rules of commenting. However, ORC has noted issues in the monitoring of the implementation of the Act (by the Agency for Electronic Media).
22. Displays of symbols and expressions sympathizing with the nature of NDH and the Ustasha regimeⁱ still appear in the public, in online and offline spaces. There has been a long-standing need to fully clarifying what exactly is illegal, while the messages sent in public by individual public figures contribute to such a state of affairs. ORC therefore recommended amending the Act on Offences against Public Order and Peace that will more clearly define the prohibition of public use and displaying of symbols of hatred in the Act, and to impose stricter penalties for this offence. The amendments which imposed stricter penalties were adopted in 2023. A Working group is currently in place regarding substantively changing the Act, including regarding the prohibition of public use and display of symbols of hatred in the Act on Offences against Public Order and Peace.
23. When it comes to hate crimes, from the data available to ORC, it is visible that the largest proportion of those crimes are motivated by the victim's national origin, sexual orientation, religion and race/ethnicity. There are some questions as to whether law enforcement bodies still fail sometimes to qualify a criminal act as a hate crime. Furthermore, with the large increase in their numbers, attack on migrant workers are becoming more common, so ORC is monitoring whether such cases are being registered as hate crimes.
24. There is low awareness on disability hate crime among stakeholders combating hate crime.
25. On a number of occasions OGE has pointed to the increase of negative rhetoric against LGBTIQ persons, even in political discourse, which often leads to violence, harassment and their stigmatization, while the increase in criminal acts motivated by hatred based on sexual orientation or gender identity by almost 37% (in 2024) supports the stated thesis of OGE.
26. OGE is particularly concerned about the negative public portrayal of the LGBTIQ population in electronic media that has not been properly recognized and addressed by the Electronic Media Council and condemnation of such practices is not visible at the political level, while at the same

time the Croatian Journalists' Association's Ethical Council (as a self-regulatory body) and OGE have determined discriminatory reporting in number of cases.

27. OGE constantly points to the fact that national strategies do not contain concrete activities related to protection of LGBTIQ people from discrimination. In addition, the accompanying action plans for the implementation of these strategic documents were not developed and adopted for 2024. so it was another year of human rights and antidiscrimination policy gap.

V. RIGHTS OF NATIONAL MINORITIES

28. In relation to official use of the minority language and script, some minorities, in particular Serbian and Roma minority still face the challenge in using this right.
29. Over 10,000 children are enrolled in education in national minority languages. Education in Czech, Hungarian, Serbian and Italian is available from pre-school to secondary school levels, while for other minority languages there is no such continuity. The obstacles when it comes to education in minority languages include the lack of the teaching staff and of the didactic materials in minority languages.
30. The right of the national minorities to the proportional representation in the public administration and the judiciary (as a positive action measure) faces difficulties in implementation. Thus, (those declaring themselves as) national minority members are still significantly underrepresented, accounting for approximately 3% of the workforce of the public administration bodies and of the government services and offices and for approximately 2,5% of the workforce of the courts and the attorney general's offices, whereas their ratio in the general population amounts to 6,2%.
31. OC notes that the Croatian educational system has recognized the problem of peer violence among children of different nationalities, including between children of the Serbian and majority populations. Although certain steps have been taken to prevent violence, such as the introduction of non-violent communication programs and teacher education, there is still a need for a more systematic approach. It is crucial to develop and implement special programs in schools that will promote tolerance, intercultural dialogue and respect for diversity. The introduction of regular workshops on combating prejudice, strengthening the mediation role of school professional services, and better cooperation with parents and local communities can significantly contribute to reducing tensions and creating a safer environment for all children. Moreover, it is necessary to actively encourage the connections between students of the Serbian and majority populations through joint programs and activities. Initiatives that include collaborative projects, joint trips, sports and cultural activities can help strengthen mutual understanding and reduce prejudice.

VI. ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PAST HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

32. In the context of war veterans, the ORC continues to receive complaints related to the status of Homeland War veterans and Croatian disabled Homeland War veterans, the length of the procedure for determining their material and other rights, exercising the right to priority employment (as a positive action measure), issues with housing, as well as social vulnerability of veterans and their family members.

33. The issue of the fate of the missing and forcibly abducted persons in the Homeland War remains one the most difficult open question related to the consequences of the war in the RC, because the families of the missing have the right to know the truth about the fate of their loved ones. Even though in 2024 positive steps were made, according to the Ministry of Croatian War Veterans, the biggest obstacle to a faster and more efficient search for missing persons is the lack of cooperation of the Republic of Serbia.
34. In 2021 the Act on Civilian Homeland War Victims was adopted, which the ORC had been continuously advocating for. CSOs warn of challenges in its implementation, which ORC reported in her 2023 and 2024 Annual Report to Croatian Parliament. CSOs point to the problems of lengthiness of the proceedings and with evidence required, including requests for subsequent documentation, examination of additional witnesses, difficulties with recognition of medical and other documentation issued by competent authorities of other countries and checking and determining the existence of obstacles, including the lengthiness of the procedure in front of the Commission for checking the existence of obstacles and providing sufficient explanations for their decisions.

VII. GENDER BASED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

35. OGE has been pointing out for years that the major weakness of the national system of protection against violence against women and domestic violence is that it is almost exclusively based on sanctioning the consequences of violence through lenient penal policy, while efforts to eliminate the causes of violence through prevention, education and training are secondary. The long-term trend of brutalization of violence is also very indicative, primarily considering that in 2023, for the first time in the Republic of Croatia, more criminal offenses than misdemeanor related to gender-based violence were recorded. The number of recorded criminal offenses has increased by four times in the period of 8 years (2015-2023), while the number of misdemeanors almost halved in the same period.
36. OGE has repeatedly expressed serious concern in 2023 about the continued escalation of femicide and the fact that most violence against women is actually committed by their closest relatives, spouses, partners, ex-partners or other family members/close friends, which is deeply concerning and a warning that systemic changes must be undertaken immediately.
37. OC notes that when it comes to shelters for victims of domestic violence, there is a big difference in the functioning and quality of services provided by shelters founded by cities/counties compared to shelters that have the status of associations. Project funds of the latter may not be used for "cold operation", which makes the functioning of the shelters constantly questionable. Although the shelters are provided with basic professional staff, they often need the help of a psychiatrist due to the impaired mental health of the users, which is often not available. In general, OC notes the problem of untimely recognition of difficulties and the actions of the social welfare system in relation to the mental health of children exposed to domestic violence. OC has information about cases in which the police do not distinguish primary perpetrators from victims. The procedure set out in the Protocol on Action in Cases of Domestic Violence is being followed, particularly in the part relating to inter-institutional information, but there is still a lack of cooperation between institutions with the aim of inter-sectoral assistance to victims and evaluation of the effects of measures. In addition, children remain in families for too long, exposed

to threatening parental care, because the accommodation capacities in alternative care are insufficient.

38. OC notes that despite the improvement of the normative framework and the tightening of sanctions, the protection of children from sexual violence is still not sufficient. Further amendments to the normative framework are necessary, as is a change in judicial practice through a stricter punishment policy, and the establishment of a quality system of support and assistance for sexually abused children. Effective prevention also requires the education of professionals who work with children and the empowerment of parents and children. The education system plays an important role, starting from the earliest age. Unfortunately, preventive programs and education of children about the dangers of sexual violence are still not available to all children and under equal conditions.
39. OC states that the project "Establishing the Barnahus Model in Croatia" is underway in RC, the aim of which is to establish a legislative, strategic and institutional framework that will ensure a multidisciplinary and uniform, child-friendly approach, cooperation and coordination of various bodies under one roof through the "children's house", as well as multiple and comprehensive services for the child and their family. OC expects that multiple interrogations of the child, re-traumatization and victimization of the child will be avoided during the criminal proceedings, as well as that, in an environment safe for children, the child will be provided with therapeutic support and a high-quality and authentic statement of the child will be ensured for the purposes of the criminal proceedings.
40. OPWD notes that a very small number of women with disabilities decide to report violence, including sexual violence due to the lack of a comprehensive system of victim's assistance, lack of information, lack of accessible shelters and lack of disability specific supports which often makes them dependent on the perpetrator. Although shelters have been established in all counties and are accessible for women with physical disabilities, the requirement is that women should be independent in self-care and in looking after children which discriminates women with disabilities who need assistance. Women with mental health issues also have difficulties in being admitted to shelters since the staff is not trained on supporting them. The government should ensure accessibility and availability of all kinds of services for violence victims with disabilities, from adaptation in communication and treatment in all aspects and procedures, the accessibility of shelters, provide housing for women victims of violence and support in finding employment.

VIII. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC LIFE

41. OPWD notes that persons with disabilities and women in particular highlight many obstacles and lack of support in participation in political and public life. There is insufficient assistance, lack of transportation, lack of interest among politicians, as well as various forms of discrimination and prejudice against women with disabilities.

IX. JOURNALISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

42. In 2023, the Criminal Code was amended introducing a new criminal offense of the "Unauthorized disclosure to the public of the content of investigative or evidentiary actions". Journalists reacted from the first announcement of the amendments, asserting that it would jeopardize media

freedom, the right to be informed as well as public interest. The changes finally adopted expressly exclude the liability of journalists, however some issues remain, particularly regarding the assessment of what constitutes predominantly public interest, in particular in the context of whistleblowers and the necessity to better coordinate/harmonize the Criminal Code with the Whistleblower Protection Act.

43. The practice of SLAPP lawsuits has continued, negatively affecting the journalists' ability to work and having a chilling effect. The claims for damages are quite high, threatening the financial sustainability and the overall survival of smaller media outlets. The working group has been set up by the Ministry of Culture and the Media, with the aim of identifying the avenues for early identification and the prevention of misuse of lawsuits against journalists.
44. The performance of journalistic work is also negatively affected by attacks and threats to which journalists and media workers are exposedⁱⁱ. In order to prevent this, the crime of "Coercion against a person performing tasks of public interest or in public service" and the Protocol on Police Conduct upon Learning of a Criminal Offense Committed to the Detriment of Journalists and Other Media Workers in the Performance of Their Work Tasks were introduced.
45. Human rights defenders are faced with a number of challenges, including online threats and harassment as well as on occasion even physical attacks, with the environmental groups being most commonly exposed to the latter. Certain groups of HRDs have been known to be targeted more often, such as those working on women's human rights, gender equality, reproductive rights, gender-based violence, rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, environmental rights, the rights of migrants and refugees.

X. THE JUDICIARY AND FREE LEGAL AID (FLA)

46. Certain positive steps have been taken towards strengthening of the justice system, such as the continuation of the digitalization process, measures to shorten the duration of the court proceedings, as well as the adoption of the guidelines for the communication of the judiciary with the public and increase in salaries for those employed in the judiciary.
47. RC remains low on the scale when it comes to the levels of perception of the independence of judiciary: according to the results of the February 2024 Eurobarometer, 37% of surveyed citizens in RC assessed the independence of courts and judges as poor, and 32% of them as very poor.
48. The duration of court proceedings and the backlog of cases are still an issue.
49. The largest number of complaints ORC received in the area of the judiciary concerned unnecessary delay of court proceedings, dissatisfaction with the court decisions, and the abuse of power.
50. In the process of the digitalization of the justice system, which is expected to bring about positive effects, caution needs to be exercised to avoid the creation of a digital gap, leaving those with the lower levels of digital literacy and not possessing the necessary technical equipment (due to, for example, their age, poverty, disability, etc.) behind.
51. The OC notes that it continues to receive complaints about the length of court proceedings, slowness and failure to schedule hearings, which leads to court proceedings lasting several months or even years. Criminal proceedings against child victims of violence are lengthy, and case law continues to show that community service and suspended sentences are often imposed as sanctions for sexual offences against children. Lengthy proceedings are also evident in the administrative branch of the judiciary when deciding on essential rights of children (such as the

right to be registered in the birth register, admission to citizenship, exercising the right to go for medical treatment, seeking international protection, etc.)

52. In 2023 a multiannual model for the FLA financing was introduced and the budgetary funds for this purpose increased, which is positive and could contribute to the sustainability of the FLA network and FLA's accessibility to the citizens. However, the payments for the first two years of the implementation of this model were late. Although the funds were increased, a number of providers still consider them insufficient for the continuous provision of the service. Thus, in order to secure the FLA system's sustainability, the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation should undertake a comprehensive analysis, in cooperation with the providers, of the actual costs of the FLA provision.
53. Challenges still present in FLA provision include uneven territorial accessibility but also the need of the civil servants of the administrative departments in the counties, which, apart from receiving requests for the approval of secondary legal aid, are authorized to provide primary legal assistance, for additional education and training in various legal areas the citizens request FLA in.

XI. MIGRATIONS AND ASYLUM

54. In 2023 amendments to the Act on International and Temporary Protection came into force, making the position of protection seekers more favorable in certain respects (i.e. by introducing the institute of humanitarian admission) but also rendering it less favorable in others, i.e. by increasing the number of possible grounds for the limitation of the seekers' freedom of movement.
55. In the past several years, ORC recorded a significant decrease in the number of complaints alleging "push-backs", i.e. the practice of refusing entry, as well as the removal of persons who have irregularly crossed the border without providing an individualized assessment of the need for protection. At the same time, CSOs have continued to report on the collected testimonies of persons about "push-back". Since the return of people without an individualized assessment can lead to violations of human rights guaranteed by European, international, and national regulations, ORC continues to stress that all allegations of these violations must be efficiently investigated.
56. Through its visit to detention centers for migrants, ORC stated that irregular migrants and international protection seekers placed in detention centers are generally unfamiliar with the Croatian legal system, their rights and obligations, and the Croatian language. In addition, members of vulnerable groups, including children, are not exempt from deprivation of liberty in the centers. According to the results of surveys in all three centers, there is a problem in identifying vulnerable persons and providing information about their rights. Access to lawyers is complicated in terms of procedure and only a small number of CSO have access to detention centers.
57. OC notes that social welfare institutions provide temporary accommodation services in crisis situations to unaccompanied children and foreign citizens. However, upon admission, they are not always provided with assistance and protection to prevent them from becoming victims of human trafficking. The main problems in the accommodation of unaccompanied children are the lack of space and the accommodation of unaccompanied children with children with behavioral disorders. OC recommends for unaccompanied children to be accommodated in a specialized

institution in which all unaccompanied children would be registered in one place, a needs assessment would be conducted and all resources for work and assistance would be provided in order to ensure better care and protection of their interests and needs. OC recommends strengthening the inclusion of migrant children in the educational system and ensuring structured, systematic and intensive learning of the Croatian language with an increased number of hours and other social activities, with the availability of interpreters and psychosocial support. Unaccompanied children are entitled to health care to the same extent as insured persons under mandatory health insurance, but we note difficulties when being admitted to a health institution and dispensing medication.

XII. SOCIAL SECURITY, RIGHT TO ADEQUATE HOUSING, RIGHT TO HEALTH

58. Since 2020 the risk-of-poverty rate has been increasing and in 2024 amounted to 20,3%, with persons 65+, especially older women and particularly older people living alone being the worst off. ORC continuously warns about the low amounts of social benefits, including in relation to rising costs of living.
59. OC notes that it is necessary to provide children from socially vulnerable families with educational assistance (study assistance, covering "hidden costs", free meals for high school students, etc.), free participation in leisure activities (sports, creative, etc.) with the provision of free equipment, available free assistance from health and other experts, and adequate housing and social services in the community intended to eliminate the consequences of poverty. Without strengthening the teams of professional workers of the Croatian Institute for Social Work and greater state allocations, these measures and forms of assistance will not be possible to achieve.
60. In March 2025 GRC adopted the National Housing Policy Plan for the period until 2030, which is a positive development, given the difficult situation in relation to housing, as it is the first housing focused strategic document. It is focused on affordable housing. It does not, however, encompass social housing, which remains to be regulated by several different pieces of legislation, which results in difficult situation those who are most vulnerable, such as low income families, Roma etc.
61. OC notes that for children and families living below the poverty line, who are unable to secure housing by purchasing or renting real estate, it is necessary to provide adequate housing. In order to prevent the separation of a child, and due to the insufficient capacity of city or state (social) apartments and long waiting lists for them, parents often illegally move into unmaintained social apartments from where they and their children are evicted by foreclosure.
62. Complaints received by ORC indicate that many citizens have difficulty-accessing healthcare, either due to the unavailability of healthcare services, lack of doctors, lack of information, administrative obstacles, or due to the sluggishness of the system that does not respond to patients' needs. Equally so, a number of citizens have been faced with the loss of health insurance. Particular challenge is the accommodation of patients who, due to their age and health condition, cannot take care of themselves. Citizens in remote places and on islands are in a more difficult position in accessing health care.
63. OGE notes that abortion in Croatia is not financed from health insurance. The average price is cca €300. Since this is data from 2018, it is reasonable to assume that the price today is even higher. In this way, Croatia did not adopt recommendation of the CEDAW committee (2015) regarding

universal coverage of abortion and modern contraception within the Croatian Health Insurance Fund. Another problem is a widespread use of conscientious objection among healthcare workers - according to data from 2018, 59% of authorized personnel are refusing to participate in abortions on that ground. In recent case (Čavajda case), after the patient who wanted an abortion was firstly rejected, she was additionally exposed to public shaming and condemnation by the director of the health institution. In the end, the patient went to a neighboring country (Slovenia) to terminate the pregnancy (which is not an unusual practice of Croatian women due to the aforementioned obstacles).

64. According to the data of the Croatian Institute for Health Insurance (2024), there is a lack of 18.2% (61/335) of gynecological teams necessary on national level, which is identical to the situation from 2019. An additional problem is the excessively high enrollment quota for patients, which is max. 9,000 of women per gynecological team, while the Croatian Medical Chamber considers that this number should be max. 4,200 patients. Health personnel point out the problem of overwork, and patients complain that they have difficulty finding gynecologists who verbally reject them despite not having fulfilled the quota of 9,000 patients. In addition to the above, the OGE occasionally receives complaints from patients on unsatisfactory conditions in maternity hospitals, including complaints on the treatment from health workers (the OGE is aware of several court proceedings initiated by dissatisfied women).
65. OPWD notes that despite expansion of the personal assistance scheme persons with disabilities still don't have enough community-based support services to enable them to live independently in the community. There is a particular lack of flexible community-based health services according to the individual needs of a person. Despite strategic documents, which present deinstitutionalization as an ongoing strategic goal, no further institutions for persons with disabilities have been transformed since 2015 despite the availability of the EU funds. Community-based support services have not been developed in place of institutionalization. The Government should take measures which would ensure that all services for persons with disabilities are organized in a way that supports independent living and inclusion in the community. A significant number of healthcare institutions remain inaccessible for persons with disabilities. Hospitals and social welfare institutions are insufficiently equipped with basic aids for persons with disabilities such as transfer lifts and mattresses for prevention of pressure sores, there is shortage of staff so persons with limited mobility often stay in bed throughout their hospital stay. There is no adequate care for prevention and treatment of pressure sores nor specialists trained in particular conditions of persons with disabilities. Orthopaedic aids are inadequate and outdated and there is excessive red tape in accessing rehabilitation and treatment. The number of gynaecological tables fully accessible to women with physical disabilities is insufficient. National disease prevention programs are not accessible to women with disabilities. There are frequent complaints that medical staff do not know how to treat persons with different disabilities and communicate with them which can result in inadequate healthcare provision. Despite a significant increase in disability benefits which were introduced in 2024 persons with disabilities continue to be at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion due to higher costs of living arising from disability, lack of employment opportunities and lack of comprehensive support system. Lack of social housing schemes particularly affects persons with disabilities due to the unavailability of accessible housing units on the market as well as high costs required to make housing units accessible in

case of acquired disability. This leads to institutionalization of persons with disabilities and hinders deinstitutionalisation efforts.

66. OPWD notes that while persons with mental disabilities make up the most persons placed in institutions which shows a complete failure of their treatment and rehabilitation, the outdated mental healthcare system hasn't been changed or complemented with recovery and human rights-based approaches. Although the Strategic framework for mental health development till 2030 envisages measures of setting up mobile mental health teams and other community based mental health services there is no additional funding planned. It is necessary to abolish coercive treatment of persons with disabilities and deprivation of legal capacity and replace them with alternative forms of support.
67. OC notes that the geographical coverage of health services for children is uneven, and there is a general lack of health workers and adequate support for children with mental health difficulties. Children highlight peer violence and the inadequate and uneven response of adults to it as one of the biggest problems of violation of their rights. There are numerous prevention programs of varying quality, the implementation of which depends on the choice, sensitivity and enthusiasm of educational workers. Most programs lack measurement of outcomes and effectiveness in terms of influencing attitudes and behavior.
68. OC notes that despite progress in the education of children with developmental disabilities (DD) through an increase in the number of teaching assistants and professional communication mediators, the strengthening of inclusive education policies and legislative changes, the early intervention system for children at risk is still underdeveloped. There is still resistance to inclusion of children with disabilities especially those with autism spectrum disorders into kindergartens and regular schools. Children with higher support needs are still educated in segregated settings due to the lack of disability experts in regular schools. There is a lack of the necessary resources and digital technologies for the education of children with DD, the assessment and expert evaluation procedures for children are lengthy, the capacity of institutions is limited, and there are architectural and administrative obstacles (such as, for example, limiting the number of teaching assistants in a classroom in relation to the difficulties, not the functioning of the students). Although setting up support centers and mobile teams for support to inclusive education was envisaged for 2018 those activities haven't been carried out yet. The 2016 survey conducted by the OPWD showed that out of 2,643 children with developmental disabilities in the treatment of centers for social welfare, only 1,075 children received early intervention services, which is slightly more than 40% on average.

XIII. LABUR RIGHTS

69. OGE has noted certain progress in statistical indicators of gender equality in the labor market. However, additional steps are needed to encourage further increase in the activity rate of women and increase in their share in the active population. special measures are needed to strengthen the position of women in the labor market, especially in relation to counties (regions) with a high share of women in registered unemployment and less favorable indicators of the risk of poverty and social and material deprivation. It is necessary to regularly conduct gender equality impact assessment procedure when making decisions significant for the area of employment and labor.

70. In relation to pay gap, according to the Croatian Statistics Bureau data on the average monthly gross salary of men employed in legal entities in Croatia in 2024. was 1.854 euros, while the average gross salary of women was 1.782 euros, indicating a gender wage gap of 3,9%, which represents a significant decrease.ⁱⁱⁱ The Eurostat data based on gross hourly earnings have been recently updated and gender pay gap is 7,4% (data from 2023). In 2023. the OGE participated in the policy study „Bridging the gender pay gap in the Western Balkans?“ with aim to uncover the causes and circumstances behind recent dynamics related to the gender pay gap in the Western Balkans^{iv}. Having in mind the complexity of the process the OGE recommended to state authorities to initiate the transposition of EU Directive 2022/2381 on pay transparency as soon as possible.
71. Although the number of employed persons with disabilities within the total number of employed persons in Croatia has increased over the last few years, the disability employment gap in Croatia in 2023 continues to be high at 39.2% while the average for the 27 member states of the European Union is 21.5%. Persons with disabilities lack accessible transport to work, awareness of the duty of reasonable accommodation in the workplace is low, support of a work assistant hasn't been secured and there are no alternative working arrangements for people who cannot work for full 8 hours. The Government should implement reasonable accommodation at work in practice as well as introduce alternative working arrangements.

XIV. CIVIC, HEALTH AND SEX EDUCATION

72. OC notes that since 2019, the Curriculum for the cross-curricular topic Civic Education has been in force, consisting of three domains: Human Rights, Democracy and Social Community. The outcomes of curricular activities are not measured, not all children have the same information and content on topics from civic education, nor do the program additionally emphasize civil and political rights and fundamental democratic principles.
73. The ORC recommended for the Civic Education to be introduced as a stand alone and mandatory school subject at all levels of primary and secondary schooling.
74. OC also notes There is also no comprehensive health education, within which the content of comprehensive sexual education can be found. Topics related to sexuality are still covered mainly within the Biology and Nature programs, through lectures by school doctors. The emphasis is on the biological perspective, while comprehensive education on the emotional, physical, health and social aspects of sexuality is lacking. Despite the fact that civil society organizations offer certain programs, they are not introduced in schools. In RC, sexual education is a prominent worldview and political issue, exposed to strong social polarization.

XV. ANTI-CORRUPTION

75. The Ac for the Protection of Persons Reporting Irregularities was first adopted in 2019, and the new Act came into force on 23 April 2022. The Act foresees three available reporting channels: internal, external and public disclosure. ORC is mandated as external channel of reporting and has been monitoring implementation of the Act in relation to internal reporting channels, the public disclosures, court proceedings and the provision of emotional support to the persons reporting irregularities.

76. Some challenges in the Act's implementation remain. Persons appointed as the internal reporting channel are not always informed enough about the implementation of certain provisions of the Act (hence the ORC has been conducting trainings and published a manual), some lack optimal conditions for the implementation of their tasks, while some experience retaliation. Persons reporting irregularities are still not informed well enough about their rights and about the procedures to be followed.
77. There is still not much case law related to the Act, the case law of the first instance court is still not fully harmonized and these types of cases are not recorded separately so as to allow for statistical monitoring. Although these types of proceedings are urgent, the courts do not always treat them as such, thus rendering the protection less efficient.

XVI. PRISON

78. Long-standing problems in the prison system are still present, and some have been further accentuated. Overcrowding continued to grow and is alarming, with occupancy rates exceeding 200% in two prisons.
79. ORC has been monitoring the organization of healthcare in the prison system, and the difficulties arising from the fact that the ministry responsible for justice is primarily responsible for its implementation are evident. Most organizational problems would be easier to solve if the responsibility for performing healthcare activities would be assumed by the ministry responsible for health.

ⁱ After the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941, Neovisna država Hrvatska /NDH ("the Independent State of Croatia") was created, ruled by the Ustasha movement.

The Ustasha government was entirely dependent on the policies of Hitler and Mussolini.

<https://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6802>

ⁱⁱ In 2024 the Safe Journalists Project reported on 27 instances of attacks and threats against journalists, 7 of which were instances of attacks on journalists, media outlets and organizations, 2 threats of death and grievous bodily injury, as well as 18 cases of other types of threats.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gender pay gap in 2023. was 6,8%

^{iv} Available at: <https://feps-europe.eu/publication/bridging-the-gender-pay-gap-in-the-western-balkans/>