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RELATIONS OF INSTITUTIONS  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA WITH  
CROATS ABROAD WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS  
ON DIASPORA RELATIONS

**Abstract:** This paper provides basic information about the legislative and institutional framework of the Republic of Croatia. This framework enables and encourages the development of systematic, continuous, and effective communication and cooperation with members of the Croatian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian national minority in twelve European countries, and the Croatian diaspora in European and overseas countries. The paper offers an analysis and description of the relationship of Croatian institutions with Croatian diaspora as well as a cross-section of the most important activities, programs, and projects that have been introduced for members of the diaspora. It places special emphasis on the work and activities of the Central State Office for Croats Abroad – the central body of the state administration responsible for developing relations with Croats outside the Republic of Croatia. It designs and implements various programs and supports numerous strategic and identity-related projects. Very important are the activities of the Ministry of Science and Education, especially in the field of learning and teaching Croatian language and culture abroad. The Central State Office for Croats Abroad, the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of Culture and Media, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, the Croatian cultural institution Matica hrvatska (Matrix Croatica), scientific institutes, universities, schools, and other institutions, organisations, and associations implement and/or support many programs and projects. They also develop partnerships with institutions and associations of the Croatian diaspora, thereby contributing to the development of Global Croatian Unity.

## **Legal and institutional framework of the Republic of Croatia for the development of the relations with Croats abroad**

We are very excited to have the opportunity to be here today to encourage, promote, and share knowledge and experience in the field of diaspora relations. To begin this paper, it is necessary to provide some basic information about the legal and institutional framework of the Republic of Croatia, which enables and encourages the development of systematic, continuous, and effective communication and cooperation with members of the Croatian people living outside the borders of Croatia. In the *Constitution of the Republic of Croatia*, Article 10 states: “The Republic of Croatia protects the rights and interests of its citizens living or residing abroad and promotes their connections with the homeland. To (the parts of) the Croatian people in other states a special care and protection of the Republic of Croatia are guaranteed.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Constitution, other documents in force on the issue of diaspora relations include the Strategy on relations of the Republic of Croatia with Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia and the Act on relations of the Republic of Croatia with Croatians Outside the Republic of Croatia of 2011, adopted in the Croatian Parliament by consensus of all political parties. The Strategy and the Act define three groups of Croats living outside Croatia: the constituent Croatian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the autochthonous Croatian national minority in twelve European states, and numerous Croatian emigrants in European and overseas states. In connection with this, our umbrella strategic document of state, the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia 2030, which was adopted in the Croatian Parliament over a year ago, defines two strategic goals in which Croats outside Croatia have great importance: Strategic Goal 4, which pertains to the global recognition and strengthening of the international position and role of Croatia, and Strategic Goal 6, which pertains to the demographic revitalization and improvement of conditions for the family. On the basis of the National Development Strategy, new medium-term strategic documents are being adopted for certain administrative areas, one of which is the National Plan for the Development of Relations of the Republic of Croatia with Croats Abroad Until 2027 and its Action Plan for the 2022-2024 term, which, until 30<sup>th</sup> March 2022, will be in the

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1 Protection of the rights of the national minorities is a very important issue in the Republic of Croatia. In the preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, all twenty-two national minorities in Croatia are mentioned: Albanians, Austrians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Montenegrins, Czechs, Hungarians, Jews, Macedonians, Germans, Poles, Roma, Romanians, Russians, Ruthenians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Italians, Turks, Ukrainians, and Vlachs. In addition to the constitutional provisions, Croatia also adopted the Constitutional National Minority Rights Act, Act on Use of Languages and Scripts of National Minorities, and other acts.

e-counselling phase.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these measures already mentioned, the Act on Foreign Affairs also plays a valuable role, emphasizing the importance of protecting the rights and interests of Croatian citizens, as well as taking care of and developing cooperation with members of the Croatian people.

The Central State Office for Croats Abroad, which was established in mid-2012, acts as the central body of the state administration for the development of relations with Croatian people outside Croatia. The Croatian Parliament does very important work on these matters through its Committee for Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia and Committee on Human and National Minority Rights. The Parliament monitors the situation of Croats abroad, including their legal situation, and proposes measures to improve multifaceted cooperation so as to achieve and protect their rights and preserve their national identity. It also monitors initiatives and proposals submitted by Croats abroad and supports the return migration program for Croatian emigrants. Special importance is placed upon the Council of the Government of the Republic of Croatia for Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia, an advisory body established in 2013 that provides assistance to the Croatian government in creating and implementing policies, activities, and programs relating to Croats abroad. It meets once a year to discuss the implementation of the Strategy and the Act on Relations of the Republic of Croatia with Croatians Outside the Republic of Croatia and other issues of interest for Croats abroad. It consists of fifty-five members including representatives from a wide variety of groups: the Croatian Parliament, ministries and other governmental bodies, scientific and cultural institutions, the Catholic Church, civil society, and all three groups of Croats abroad, namely, the community from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian national minority, and the Croatian diaspora. During the annual sessions of the Council, organized by the Central State Office, members of the Council have the opportunity to meet with leading Croatian experts in various fields as well as the highest officials of the Republic of Croatia, including Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.

Croatian ministries and scientific and cultural institutions are also significantly involved with Croats abroad. These include the Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Media, the Ministry of Science and Education, and the oldest Croatian cultural institution, *Matica hrvatska* (Matrix Croatica), which dates back to 1842. Also worthy of mention are the Croatian Heritage Foundation (which has decades of experience working to develop relations and connections with Croats abroad), the Institute for Croatian Language and Linguistics, and the Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences. These are just a few of the many institutions involved in this field. When it comes to protecting their rights and interests and preserving Croatian heritage, language, and culture, the

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2 The presentation was held on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2022.

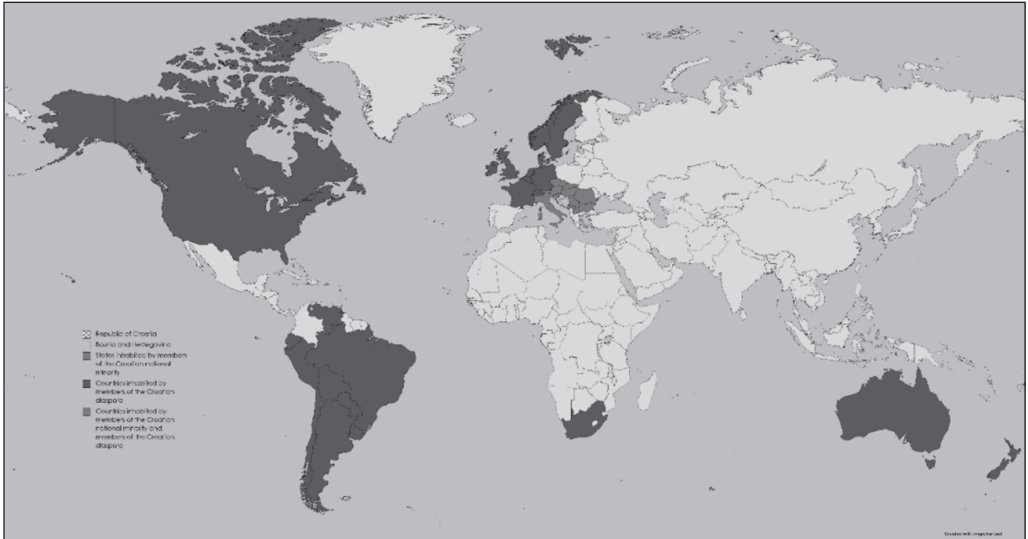
communities of Croats abroad enjoy the full support of all bodies responsible for their care: the Central State Office (an executive body of the state administration), the Council of the Government (an advisory body of the Croatian government), the parliamentary committees, three members of the Croatian Parliament dedicated as representatives of Croats abroad, and the Croatian Heritage Foundation. They implement effective public policies for the development of relations between the Republic of Croatia and Croats abroad and provide these communities with a robust system of assistance. At the Central State Office for Croats Abroad, we consider it both an honor and responsibility to cherish the partnership and two-way relationship between Croatia and Croats abroad. Every Croat, regardless of where they reside, is part of a large global Croatian family. By strengthening our unity, we create opportunities for future generations of Croatians across the globe.

Care for Croats abroad is an integral part of the domestic and foreign policy of the Republic of Croatia. With the ensured comprehensive legal and institutional preconditions, an effective and systematic cooperation with members of the Croatian people living outside the borders of Croatia is possible.

## **The global Croat population**

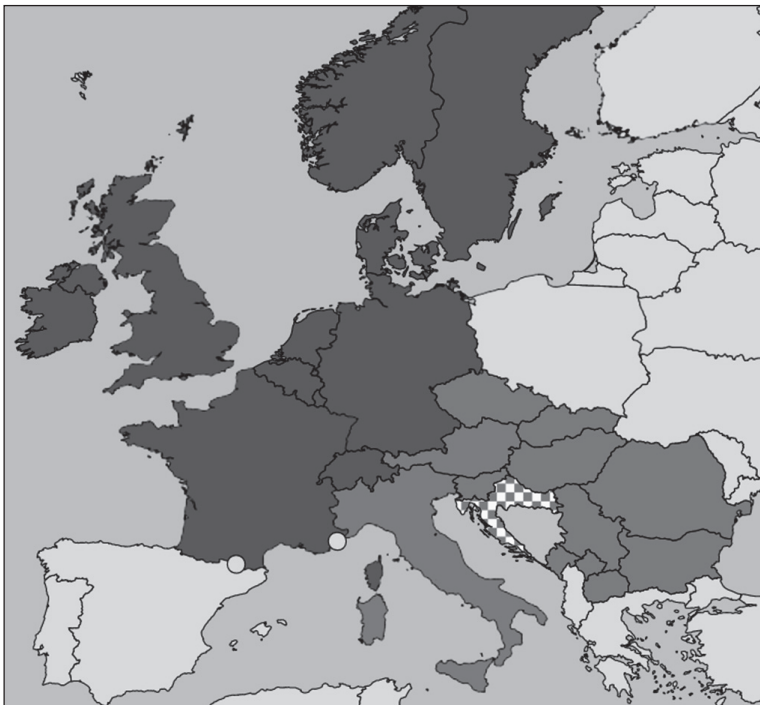
Today, it is estimated that between three and four million Croats and people of Croat descent are living outside the Republic of Croatia. The maps below show the parts of the world where Croats currently live. Yellow refers to the constituent Croatian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, red refers to the autochthonous Croatian national minority in European states (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia) blue refers to the Croatian emigrant population in Europe and overseas, and purple refers to Austria and Italy, where there are both minority and emigrant communities.

**Map 1: Distribution of Croats in the world**



Source: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/>

**Map 2: Distribution of Croats in Europe**



Source: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/>

Croatian communities exist all over the globe, Croats live on all continents. Here is a brief overview of the size of the population by state: 544.780 Croats live in Bosnia and Herzegovina (one of the three constituent peoples), and it is estimated that about 1.000 live in Bulgaria, 2.000 in the Czech Republic, 40.000 in Hungary, 200 in Kosovo, 8.000 in Montenegro, 4.000 in North Macedonia, 6.000 in Romania, 60.000 in Serbia, 3.000 in Slovakia, 50.000 in Slovenia (in all ten states - Croatian national minority), then 130.000 in Austria (national minority 40.000, diaspora 90.000) 60.000 in Italy (national minority 15.000, diaspora 45.000) and all as Croatian diaspora: Argentina – 250.000, Australia – 250.000, Belgium – 7.000, Bolivia – 5.000, Brazil – 70.000, Canada – 250.000, Chile – 200.000, Denmark – 2.500, Ecuador – 4.000, France – 40.000, Germany – 500.000, Ireland – 20.000, Luxembourg – 3.000, New Zealand – 100.000, Norway – 2.000, Paraguay – 5.000, Peru – 6.000, South Africa – 8.000, Sweden – 40.000, Switzerland – 80.000, The Netherlands – 10.000, United Kingdom – 5.000, United States of America – 1.200.000, Uruguay – 5.000, Venezuela – 5.000.<sup>3</sup> The estimates are based on the official statistics from each listed state as well as the assessments of institutions and umbrella associations of Croats abroad, diplomatic and consular missions of the Republic of Croatia, the Catholic Church, and several international organizations.

## **Development of relations between institutions of the Republic of Croatia and the diaspora**

As the central state administration body responsible for relations between the Republic of Croatia and Croats abroad, the Central State Office coordinates and monitors activities between Croatia's ministries, state administration bodies, and other authorities that deal with Croats abroad. The Central State Office, which is currently headed by Secretary of State Zvonko Milas, also strives to support all valuable projects, programs, ideas, and initiatives of Croatian diaspora communities that contribute to the aim of nurturing and encouraging culture, historical heritage, and cultural creativity within the diaspora. To provide support for programs and projects of Croatian communities, organizations, and individuals abroad, financial resources are granted through public requests, public tenders, and signed agreements. From its founding in 2012 through the end of 2021, the Central State Office has allocated funds totaling more than €51.5 million for use in more than 9,900 programs, scholarships, and projects for Croatian communities and Croats worldwide. Of this amount, about €5 million was allocated for more than 2,400 such initiatives within the diaspora.

3 Data retrieved from the website of the Central State Office: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/>.

Twice a year the Central State Office publishes the Public Call for Projects of Interest of Croats Abroad. The program was designed and launched in 2014 with the aim of promoting ties and strengthening cooperation between Croatia and Croats abroad, maintaining and strengthening the national identity, protecting the rights and interests of Croatian communities, preserving cultural heritage and Croatian language, and fostering the global Croatian cultural community. The program is intended for all Croatian communities in the world. It offers assistance to the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian minority communities, the frequently vulnerable returnees from the Croatian diaspora, and the most vulnerable Croats abroad, the emigrants, who often experience extremely difficult life circumstances. The Central State Office also publishes Public Tender for the Application of Programs/Projects of Croatian Emigrant Organizations in European and Overseas States in order to obtain financial support. The goal of the program is to preserve and encourage cooperation between the Republic of Croatia and Croats abroad in the spheres of culture, science, the economy, and sports, among others. The Central State Office has been conducting this program since 2012. Up until the Regulation of the Tender was amended in 2018, however, the aid was intended only for less developed states in South America and South Africa. Now it is open to any country where there are diaspora communities.

In addition to ensuring the financial means for the programs and projects of Croats abroad, the Central State Office also encourages and provides assistance with repatriation. Recent amendments to the Act on Croatian Citizenship make it easier for Croats abroad and their family members to acquire Croatian citizenship. It eased the requirements, simplified the necessary documentation, and facilitated the acquisition process, resulting in an overall increase in interest in Croatian citizenship. The intent was to further strengthen the legal link between emigrants and the state, thus hopefully leading many to choose to return to Croatia. Likewise, amendments to the Act on Foreigners modified the definitions of temporary and permanent residence, permitted temporary residence for more humanitarian reasons, and made it possible to employ return migrants and their spouses regardless of the spouse's citizenship status. It should also be pointed out that processing applications for Croatian citizenship would not be possible without the great effort of our colleagues at diplomatic and consular missions.

One of the roles of the Welcome Office, an organizational unit of the Central State Office, is to provide support to returning Croatian emigrants and their family members in integrating into the social and economic life of the Republic of Croatia. It offers informational, advisory, and mentoring support in resolving numerous status issues of these returnees.

The Central State Office also provides assistance with investment projects originating in the diaspora. Such projects have had a significant impact in the last thirty years. It

also assists Croatian exporters looking for networking opportunities within the Croatian diaspora or in foreign markets. We honor the Croatian diaspora's strong and continuous contribution to the overall economy of Croatia, which in recent years had accounted for around 7% of the national GDP.

As part of its coordinating role, the Central State Office, also cooperates with other authorities, ministries, institutions, councils, and committees whose work is focused on Croats abroad.

For example, the Central State Office, together with the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, cooperates with diplomatic and consular missions of the Republic of Croatia. In cooperation and partnership with Croatian embassies throughout the world, it conducts public tender for the Croatian diaspora on an annual basis that is used as partial funding for hundreds of projects in Croatian communities.

The Directorate of Pastoral Care for Croats abroad plays a key role not only in the religious domain, but also in nurturing Croatia's national identity. It coordinates activities in a total of 187 Croatian Catholic parishes, missions, communities, and centers around the world. Throughout history, Croatian priests have accompanied the emigrants to their destination countries. The Catholic Church has always acted as an important link between Croatian emigrants and the homeland.

The Republic of Croatia pays special attention to the teaching of the Croatian language and Croatian culture that is provided to over 5,300 students in emigrant communities in more than twenty countries worldwide. To nurture and encourage study of the Croatian language – one of the most important elements of the national identity – the Ministry of Science and Education organizes language and culture classes for Croatian citizens living temporarily or permanently outside Croatia and for children and youth of Croatian origin. These classes are also open to any other children interested in studying Croatian and learning about Croatian culture. There are also similar classes abroad that are integrated into the local public education systems or organized by Croatian communities and Catholic missions.<sup>4</sup>

On top of this, the Central State Office offers scholarships each academic year for university Croatian language courses (levels A1 to C2) in the Republic of Croatia and online distance learning courses of Croatian language through the HiT-1 programs. In addition, free Croatian language courses (levels A1 and A2) have been available online for English and Spanish speakers since 1<sup>st</sup> January 2018. As of 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022, it had been used by more than 10,000 people.

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4 More information about the teaching of Croatian language and culture abroad is available on the website of the Ministry of Science and Education: <https://mzo.gov.hr/>.



Furthermore, at the initiative of the Central State Office and with the support of the Ministry of Science and Education, the University of Zagreb launched the Special Enrollment Quota for Members of the Croatian National Minority and Croatian Diaspora in the 2018/2019 academic year. The program was successful and in the 2021/2022 academic year, seven Croatian higher education institutions have ensured enrollment based on the quota. The interest of young Croats abroad to study in Croatia and take advantage of this quota has been growing.

The Scholarship Program for Croatian Students Abroad is another noteworthy educational program. Its goal is to foster scholars' personal development, knowledge, intellectual abilities, and skills acquisition and to encourage them to learn about and nurture their Croatian culture and national identity. The Central State Office awards scholarships each year through a public competition. Since the 2021/2022 academic year, the number and financial amount of these scholarships have increased significantly. Students from Croat communities abroad will receive 1,000 scholarships, more than ever before.

After a thorough comparative analysis of practice in the field of public policy towards the diaspora, there was interest in launching university studies in English adapted to the needs of Croatian diaspora youth. Accordingly, in April 2021 the Faculty of Economics and Business, the University of Zagreb, and the Central State Office signed a cooperative agreement to form Leadership, a graduate university study program. The program is expected to commence in autumn 2022. The existing Demography and Croatian Diaspora graduate university study program, held in Croatian and organized at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Croatian Studies, has already been running for three years and has gained considerable interest among students from the diaspora. In recent years, more and more higher education institutions have begun offering classes on the Croatian diaspora.

In 2017, the Central State Office started the *Korijeni* (Roots) project, through which primary school students from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, states inhabited by the Croatian national minority, and states inhabited by the Croatian emigrants can meet via videoconferences. It also provides continuous support to teachers of Croatian language and culture abroad and to Croatian schools in the diaspora. As part of this project, the Summer School of Croatian Identity was held in August 2019 in Vukovar, a heroic city of the Homeland War of Croatia and a symbol of global Croatian unity. It was attended by many grammar school students from Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Slovenia. During their seven-day stay in Vukovar, participants acquired new skills, met local students, and were introduced to the rich cultural, historical, and natural sights of the city.

At the initiative of Croatian diaspora communities and in cooperation with the Association of Croatian American Professionals, the Central State Office conducted a

project called Summer School Domovina (Homeland) in 2019 for Croatian diaspora youth aged eighteen to thirty. Participants experienced the homeland of their ancestors on an educational road trip through the Republic of Croatia focusing on Croatian history, culture, and customs as well as contemporary issues and challenges facing Croatia. Out of a concern for health and safety during the coronavirus pandemic, the program did not take place in 2020 and 2021. This year, however, we expect to begin again. The long-term intention is to implement this project at least once a year.

The Central State Office is also preparing the Ruđer project, named after the famous 18<sup>th</sup>-century Croatian scientist and philosopher Ruđer Bošković, which is intended for secondary school students of the Croatian diaspora and national minority communities. Its mission is to attract students and bolster Croatia as a university destination. Croatian higher education institutions will present their study programs and make participants aware of the possibilities to study in Croatia. Participants will visit campuses and student residences and will get an idea of what it might be like to live in Croatia. It also offers them a chance to become more familiar with Croatian cultural, historical, and natural heritage.

## **Conclusion**

For the Government of the Republic of Croatia and for all state and public institutions of Croatia, it is of utmost importance to improve relations with Croats abroad and to maintain systematic communication and cooperation. Relations are built with members of the Croatian people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian national minority in twelve European states, and the Croatian emigrant communities in European and overseas states. In this presentation, we mentioned some of the many ways in which cooperation with members of the Croatian emigration is achieved.

With the cooperation of the Croatian state and public institutions as well as with various associations of the Croatian diaspora, cooperation between individuals and families has improved considerably. This cooperation is self-evident in Croatian society and works much better than is sometimes claimed. The contacts are constant, close, and strong and their true values and intensity have been demonstrated in both the most difficult and the happiest moments. Immediately after two major earthquakes hit Croatia in 2020, emigrants provided tremendous help and support. During more joyful times in 2018, they celebrated the tremendous performance of the Croatian national football team at the World Cup. In addition to Croatian culture and language, sports – especially football – play an important role as well. In the past decades, the Croatian national team has achieved great

successes that certainly would not have been possible if players born and raised outside Croatia had not played for the national team. It clearly shows the extraordinary strength of their connection with the homeland in which their parents or grandparents were born. Even those who do not follow football closely are familiar with the names of Ivan Rakitić, Joe Šimunić, Robert and Niko Kovač, Ivan Klasnić, and Mladen Petrić, all of whom were born in Germany, Switzerland, or Australia. Several young players who are just beginning to play at the big stage like Marin Pongračić, Josip Stanišić, and Gabriel Vidović were born in Germany and play for both German clubs and the Croatian national team. All of this is a source of pride for Croatians and testifies to the global Croatian unity in which all citizens of the Republic of Croatia and all Croats around the world partake.

Today's world is increasingly becoming a global village in which everything is interconnected, communication capabilities are historically unparalleled, and new dynamic social processes are in a state of continuous change. The development of a Global Croatian Unity, which includes developing awareness of its existence, is crucial for the future development of the Croatian nation, culture, and state in the modern world.

This concept of identity and development is also applicable to other European cultures, nations, and states.

Finally, I would like to thank the Ferenc Mádl Institute of Comparative Law and the Research Institute for Hungarian Communities Abroad on their efforts in organizing this very successful conference. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to share our experiences and to familiarize ourselves with other states' experiences. This is very important and useful to all of us. We live in a challenging time, faced with many troubles, from the global coronavirus pandemic to natural disasters to the war being waged on the territory of Ukraine, just over 300 km away from here. I would like to wish everyone health, peace, and much success in your work. I hope and indeed believe that these difficult circumstances will encourage us to recognize the positive in ourselves and in others and that we will respect each other more, even when we do not have the same opinion on certain issues. We will sincerely strive to become the best people we can.