



**BROKEN
CHALK**

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United
Nations Human Rights Council 4th Cycle – 50th Session

Right to Education

Country Review: Republic of Croatia

Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK

April 2025

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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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I. Introduction

1. Broken Chalk has drafted the following report as a stakeholder contribution to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for the Republic of Croatia. As Broken Chalk's focus is on combating human rights violations within the educational sphere, the contents of this report and the following recommendations will primarily focus on the Right to Education.
2. The Croatian Constitution guarantees free and compulsory primary education, while secondary and higher education are also accessible.ⁱ Primary education lasts for eight years, and there is the possibility of parallel elementary education, which can include music and dance. Secondary educational institutions are divided into high schools, vocational schools, and artistic secondary schools.ⁱⁱ This constitutional commitment underscores the country's commitment to educational equity and human rights. Additionally, Croatia has made significant strides in advancing inclusive education by establishing a structured educational system for children with developmental difficulties, starting from pre-primary age.ⁱⁱⁱ
3. Croatia has made significant steps in improving its education system, with a strong focus on ensuring the right to education for all citizens. By implementing several vital reforms and initiatives, the country has demonstrated its commitment to improving educational opportunities and outcomes.
4. Firstly, in 2023, Croatia started the most comprehensive reform of its primary education system in the past three decades with the "Whole-Day School" project, which will initially be implemented in 62 schools. This four-year pilot project aims to create a primary education system that is more balanced, effective, and sustainable.^{iv} This project aims to enhance learning outcomes for all Croatian students, with a particular focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.^v Since the project is still in its early phases, specific data regarding its influence on learning outcomes is not yet available.
5. Croatia's dedication to enhancing its educational system is further evidenced by the National Plan for the Development of Education and Training, which extends until 2027. This all-inclusive plan, with a budget of almost EUR 2 billion, encompasses early childhood education, primary and secondary education, vocational training, and adult education, among other educational areas.^{vi}
6. Furthermore, Croatia has implemented essential reforms in the field of vocational education and training (VET) to improve the connection between education and the labour market. These reforms include creating new procedures, shifting the focus from content to learning outcomes, and introducing concepts like qualification standards and vocational standards.^{vii}
7. Together, these initiatives demonstrate Croatia's dedication to developing an inclusive, high-quality, and progressive educational system that respects and promotes the fundamental right to education for all its citizens.

II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

8. Croatia was last reviewed in May 2020. The country received 229 recommendations, 198 of which were supported. Ten of the recommendations pertained to the Right to Education, with 9 being supported.^{viii}
9. Among the most prevalent topics addressed in the recommendations were the improvements in the accessibility of education for individuals with disabilities, the provision of adequate living

conditions and access to education for the Roma national minority, and the enhancement of inclusivity and equal opportunities in education.^{ix}

10. Additionally, implementing a curriculum on age-appropriate and comprehensive sexuality education, to be provided throughout schooling, was recommended by Fiji and Iceland.^x
11. The 2020 Compilation on Croatia included observations and recommendations from several international bodies regarding the country's educational system. The most prevalent topics in the Compilation were recommendations to encourage non-traditional career paths and diversifying academic and career options for both genders, accelerating the Croatian language course application process to increase unaccompanied and separated children's access to education, and ensuring Roma children receive quality education in their mother tongue and eradicate segregation of Roma children in the educational system. Furthermore, UNESCO reported that Croatia had developed the National Roma Inclusion Strategy (2013-2020), which prioritised education to increase Roma children's inclusion and educational quality to the national average.^{xi}
12. The 2020 Summary of Stakeholders' submissions on Croatia included recommendations from stakeholders, such as: ensuring effective and non-discriminatory access to education for asylum-seeking children; addressing the limited access to education for people with disabilities; improving the quality of sexual education and decreasing the influence of the Catholic Church on educational policies; eliminating segregation of Roma children in the educational system; and removing discriminatory content from textbooks and addressing discrimination against minorities in schools.^{xii}
13. Croatia's 2020 National report for the UN-UPR highlights the country's efforts in addressing many of these challenges. Firstly, the Anti-Discrimination Act and the CPA prohibit all forms of discrimination, with national documents reinforcing protection against discrimination. Furthermore, education is provided for 29,868 students with developmental disabilities in regular and special primary and secondary schools. The National Strategy for the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (2017-2020) promotes universal design principles, enhances access to public services and transportation, and trains education professionals to work effectively with individuals with disabilities.^{xiii}
14. Additionally, education in the language and script of national minorities is guaranteed by the Constitution, the Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities (CARNM), and the Act on Education in Languages and Scripts of National Minorities. Equal access to education for Roma children is ensured, with an annual allocation of over HRK 10 million for Roma education.^{xiv}
15. Finally, unaccompanied children have the right to education under the same conditions as Croatian nationals, supported by the protocol on the Treatment of Unaccompanied Children (2018).^{xv}

III. Financial barriers and systemic weaknesses

16. Systemic weaknesses in funding arrangements continue to be a key issue, according to the National Plan for the Development of the Education System, which was adopted in March 2023.^{xvi}
17. One of the main challenges mentioned in the plan was the lack of support for institutions, including personnel, material, and infrastructural capacities. To address this challenge, the government has allocated more than EUR 2 billion to implement the actions outlined in the

National Plan, with a significant portion coming from EU funds for the 2021-2027 period and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.^{xvii}

18. Croatia spent only 4.2% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on educational institutions, which is below the OECD average of 5.1%. Furthermore, Croatia spends USD 8,150 annually per full-time equivalent student, compared to the OECD average of USD 12,647.^{xviii}
19. These financial barriers hinder the right to education by limiting the resources available for quality teaching and learning materials, while restricting the ability to maintain and improve educational infrastructure, and likely leading to understaffing, which in turn affects the quality of education provided.^{xix}
20. According to an anonymous interview with a Croatian student conducted by Broken Chalk, students in Croatia are heavily reliant on family contributions to cover their educational expenses. This can be a significant barrier to accessing higher education for students from low-income families. Some families struggle with buying textbooks for their children because they are expensive. Urban areas in Croatia cover the costs of textbooks for their students. Still, this support does not extend to rural areas, which is an issue for low-income families, as well as for families with multiple children.^{xx}
21. At the university level, the country offers dorms for students at relatively low prices. However, this is based on whether one is studying outside of one's hometown, the household's earnings, as well as the number of siblings the student has, to determine who needs it the most. Furthermore, Croatia provides socioeconomic stipends based on household income, which enables many students to attend universities in different cities, even if their parents cannot afford to finance them. However, financial assistance cannot be provided to everyone, and only a few students can work while studying. Therefore, if a student's parents cannot finance their education and they are unable to receive help from the government, it becomes challenging for them to attend university. This also has an impact on access to higher education, as students may face financial difficulties, and it isn't easy to work while studying.^{xxi}

IV. Access to education and integration for vulnerable groups in Croatia

22. Children of immigrants and refugees in Croatia have significant difficulties accessing education. The 2023 report by the Ombudswoman for Children emphasises persistent challenges in the educational system for children who are under international protection and those who are seeking it. Key issues include: inadequate language support, which causes frustration and isolation; enrolment difficulties, which result in some children being placed in lower grades, which has an impact on their socialisation and may lead to peer violence; delays in organising preparatory classes, where children frequently wait months before classes are approved; and a lack of support for language learning and homework assistance.^{xxii}
23. According to the anonymous interview, the students might struggle if they do not speak Croatian. At the university level, most universities offering their curriculum in English are private, which may present a financial challenge to refugees and asylum seekers. Schools are making efforts to integrate refugee and immigrant students through Croatian language programs, cultural workshops and inclusion initiatives. However, the effectiveness of these efforts varies by region and the availability of resources. Furthermore, Croatia was not a very multicultural country before, and this has only changed in recent years. That is why the process of handling these new challenges is slow, and it is new for the whole school staff. First, they

will need to learn how to implement the integration adequately, which takes time. Additionally, the Croatian language is complicated to learn, so it takes some time to grasp it to a level where a person can study in Croatian.^{xxiii}

- 24.** This challenge impedes the right to education due to long wait times for preparatory classes, language barriers that hinder learning and integration, the possibility of social isolation and peer violation due to incorrect grade placement, and the limitation of academic progress due to a lack of homework help and language support.^{xxiv}

V. Quality and relevance of education

- 25.** Several quality-related issues at various educational levels are identified in the National Plan for the Development of Education and Training until 2027. In preschool education, problems with staff qualifications, ineffective funding mechanisms, and inadequate quality control have been identified. In primary education, issues such as insufficient teacher preparation, reduced teaching hours, and lower student achievement have been identified. In vocational education, the problems identified include the slow adaptation of programs to labour market demands, inadequate employer training, and declining interest in three-year programs. Finally, in higher education, the identified problems include limited internalisation, poor labour market connections, as well as low graduation rates.^{xxv}
- 26.** This challenge of quality and relevance of the education impede the right to education by: offering education that may not be in line with the demands of the labour market, which could affect future employment prospects; resulting in low graduation rates in higher education, which limit students' ability to finish their studies; providing inadequate teaching hours and lower student achievements in primary education, which can affect overall educational outcomes; and providing inadequate preparation for future careers, especially in vocational education.^{xxvi}
- 27.** These challenges collectively undermine the right to education in Croatia by creating barriers to access, reducing the quality of education, and potentially limiting students' future options. To guarantee that every student in Croatia can fully realise their entitlement to a high-quality education, these challenges must be addressed.

VI. Recommendations

- 28.** Broken Chalk acknowledges Croatia's commitment to addressing the first challenge of financial barriers and systemic weaknesses by allocating more than EUR 2 billion for the implementation of measures outlined in the National Plan. Broken Chalk recommends implementing a progressive tuition fee system that takes into account students' socioeconomic backgrounds to enhance this effort further. This may include extending the current linear tuition system to include more complex income-based brackets, thereby preventing students from disadvantaged backgrounds from being disproportionately affected.
- 29.** Broken Chalk recommends establishing a special fund for the improvement of educational institutions' infrastructure, with an emphasis on equipping schools in rural areas. This fund should be managed transparently, with precise criteria for distribution based on need and possible impact on educational outcomes.

30. Broken Chalk recommends that Croatia develop a comprehensive national strategy for integrating immigrant and refugee children into the educational system. This strategy should include mandatory preparatory classes with a maximum waiting period of one month, intensive language support, and cultural integration activities. To ensure that this strategy is applied consistently across all regions, it should be protected by legislation.
31. Broken Chalk also suggests that Croatia establish a mentorship program that pairs local students and teachers with refugee and immigrant students. The school system should formally implement this initiative, providing mentors with training and recognition for their role in supporting integration.
32. Broken Chalk recommends that Croatia establish a national teacher development program focused on innovative pedagogies and digital skills. All teachers should be required to participate in this program, which should be integrated into their ongoing professional development. Clear career advancement pathways should be linked to the completion of specific modules.
33. Broken Chalk recommends that Croatia establish stronger partnerships between educational institutions and industry, specifically in vocational education. A national framework for industry placements, where students spend a significant amount of their study time in relevant organisations to ensure their skills align with the demands of the labour market, could be one way to achieve this.
34. Broken Chalk appreciates Croatia's efforts in developing the National Plan for the Development of the Education System until 2027 and encourages the government to maintain its commitment to these reforms. Broken Chalk especially values the focus on digitalisation and the development of digital competences, as highlighted in the Digital Croatia Strategy 2032. To build on this, Broken Chalk suggests that Croatia establish a national digital learning platform that offers free, high-quality educational materials that align with the Croatian curriculum. This platform should provide personalised pathways, engaging content, and assessment tools to all students, irrespective of their financial situation.
35. Croatia can take invaluable steps in addressing these challenges in its education system by implementing these recommendations, ensuring that all students can exercise their right to education and have access to quality, relevant education that prepares them for the future.

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