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REPORT on the mission to CROATIA

9 – 10 September 2025

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Introduction

Following the decision by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to consolidate the Organisation's migration-related work and ensure stability and continuity, a Division on Migration and Refugees (DMR) was established in the Directorate General of Human Rights and the Rule of Law (DGI), effective 1 February 2025. The DMR notably coordinates the implementation of the [Council of Europe Action Plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum in Europe](#) (2021-2025), and the preparation of a new action plan on migration and asylum 2026-2029. It also manages, among others, the [Network of Focal Points on Migration](#), composed of representatives from relevant ministries in the member States dealing with migration issues; its aim is to exchange good practices and to enhance co-operation between the different stakeholders in the member States and the Council of Europe.

One of the DMR's key activities is to carry out country missions to member States to collect and analyse information on migration law and policies, as well as to propose to the member States specific tailored assistance in addressing the increasing challenges of migration as noted also in the [2023 Reykjavik Declaration](#) of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe.

On 9 – 10 September 2025 the Head of the DMR Mr Nikolaos Sitaropoulos, accompanied by Ms Tatiana Trussevits, Legal Advisor, carried out the mission to Croatia. The mission was the opportunity to collect information and exchange views with a number of national and international stakeholders on the development and planned measures to further enhance the efficiency and effectiveness notably of the Independent Border Monitoring Mechanism (IMM) on which the present report focuses. Discussions also addressed issues concerning measures taken to further reinforce the protection of accompanied and unaccompanied migrant children in the country, including in the context of asylum procedures.

The DMR would like to express its profound gratitude to the Permanent Representative of Croatia to the Council of Europe, Ambassador Toma Galli, the Representative of Croatia before the European Court of Human Rights Ms Štefica Stažnik, and the Assistant Representative and Head of Department in the Office of the Representative, Ms Ana Klasiček Popović, for their precious support and assistance in organising efficiently this mission.

The mission to Croatia was carried out jointly by the DMR and representatives of the [Council of Europe's Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights](#) (DEJ)The present report covers only the activities of the DMR Delegation.

Meetings and sites visited

At the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, the DMR met with Mr Dalibor Jurić, Director of the Directorate for European Affairs, International Relations and EU Funds; Mr Dario Dudas, Head of the Sector for Foreigners and International Protection, Directorate for Immigration, Citizenship and Administrative Affairs; Mr Mario Tomas, Head of the Reception Centre for International Protection Applicants in Zagreb, Directorate for Immigration, Citizenship and Administrative Affairs; Mr Zvonimir Vrbljanin, Head of the Illegal Migration Service, Border Directorate; Mr Dejan Dretar, Head of the Organised Crime Service, the Criminal Police Directorate; Mr Željko Kralj, Head of the Internal Control Department, Minister's Office; and Ms Verica Kuhar Hrlić, Head of the Service for European Legislation, Directorate for European Affairs, International Relations and EU Funds.

At the State Attorney General's Office, responsible for launching and carrying out criminal investigations into any criminal activities, including trafficking, exploitation, or sexual abuse, of migrant children, the DMR met with Ms Andrea Šurina Marton, Deputy State Attorney General, Head of the Criminal Department; Ms Tanja Šušak, Deputy State Attorney General, Head of the Civil-Administrative Department; Ms Natalija Slavica, Deputy State Attorney General, Member of the Expert Council for the Execution of the ECHR Judgments and Decisions; and

Ms Nikolina Pilja, Deputy Municipal State Attorney in Sisak, seconded to the State Attorney General's Office.

During the meeting with the Coordination Board of the Independent Monitoring Mechanism for the protection of fundamental rights in the actions of police officers of the Ministry of the Interior in the area of border protection, illegal migration and international protection (IMM), the DMR met with Prof. Anna-Maria Getoš Kalac, PhD, Head of the Coordination Board; Ms Selma Ilić, Deputy Head of the Coordination Board; and Ms Petra Šprem, PhD, Administrative Associate of the Coordination Board.

The DMR also met with the Ombudswoman of Croatia, Ms Tena Šimonović Einwalter, and her Office: Ms Dijana Kesonja, Deputy Ombudswoman, Mr Saša Rajić, Deputy Ombudsman; Ms Snježana Stanić, Advisor to the Ombudswoman; and Ms Vanja Bakalović, Advisor to the Ombudswoman, and with representatives of two civil society organisations: the [Centre for Peace Studies](#) and the [Croatian Law Centre](#).

Furthermore, the DMR met with the representatives of the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, of the Office of the Ombudswoman for Children, and of the UNHCR Croatia.

At the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, the Head of the DMR and his Delegation met with Ms Marija Penava Šimac, Head of the Service for the Protection of Other Socially Vulnerable Groups; and Ms Alma Bernat, Senior Advisor.

At the Office of the Ombudswoman for Children, the Head of the DMR and his Delegation met with Ms Tatjana Holjevac, Deputy Ombudswoman for Children; and Ms Nina Čuričić, Advisor to the Ombudswoman for Children.

The DMR also met with the Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Croatia, Ms Anna Rich, and Ms Kristina Benić Belavić, Advisor.

In addition, the DMR carried out two on-site visits:

The [One Stop Shop Welcoming Centre](#) (*Centar Dobrodošlice*) is run by the City of Zagreb. Operational since September 2024, it is a multipurpose hub that renders informational and other assistance, including Croatian language classes, to the applicants for international protection, persons granted international or temporary protection, and foreign workers with a stay and work permit. The Head of the DMR and his Delegation met with the municipal civil servants assigned to render informational services in the One Stop Shop Welcoming Centre and familiarised themselves with the Centre's activities focused on social inclusion of non-nationals in Croatia.

The Reception Centre for asylum seekers in Kutina is operated by the Ministry of the Interior and primarily accommodates vulnerable asylum seekers, including families with young children and older persons. The DMR Delegation held an exchange with its Administration and visited the premises, familiarising themselves with the material living conditions. It was observed that facilities for physical activities are available, such as the indoor gym equipped with weightlifting and other machines and an outdoor children's playground; the canteen offers halal meals; and residents may enjoy leisure activities, such as sewing and painting, in a designated area. The Head of the DMR and his Delegation spoke with some residents, including a family with young children from Syria and an older woman from the Chechen Republic, the Russian Federation, all of whom unanimously expressed gratitude to the Croatian authorities for the accommodation and services provided, including Croatian language classes.

[Thematic scope of the country mission](#)

Croatia was selected as the destination of this country mission given that the country (part of the Schengen Areas since 2023) has the longest external land border of the European Union

(EU) (about 1,350 km). Facing an increased number of migrants arriving to Croatia,¹ many of whom reportedly willing to continue the journey further to Western Europe, the Croatian authorities have encountered certain difficulties in policing the borders, in particular, the so-called “green border”² with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. In the process of addressing the migration related challenges, the Croatian authorities have gained valuable experience that could be of great relevance for other member States of the Council of Europe irrespective of whether they are part of the EU or are EU candidate or neighbouring States.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, due to enter into application in June 2026, introduces, among others, the requirement to establish in each EU member State an independent monitoring mechanism to “(a) monitor compliance with the EU and international law, including the Charter, in particular as regards access to the asylum procedure, the principle of non-refoulement, the best interest of the child and the relevant rules on detention, including relevant provisions on detention in national law, during the screening; and (b) ensure that substantiated allegations of failure to respect fundamental rights in all relevant activities in relation to the screening are dealt with effectively and without undue delay, trigger, where necessary, investigations into such allegations and monitor the progress of such investigations.”³ As Croatia was the pioneer of this process, having set up the first ever independent border monitoring mechanism (IMM) as early as in 2021, the functioning of the IMM was of particular interest for this mission.

Furthermore, in view of the Council of Europe’s multifaceted work to enhance protection of vulnerable migrants and refugees within the framework of the Council of Europe Action Plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum in Europe (2021-2025), the country mission also considered the situation of migrant children, including unaccompanied ones.

Independent Monitoring Mechanism (IMM)

The “Independent Monitoring Mechanism for the protection of fundamental rights in the actions of police officers of the Ministry of the Interior in the area of border protection, illegal migration and international protection” (*Nezavisni mehanizam nadzora*) was established by the Croatian Ministry of the Interior in 2021 on the basis of the Cooperation Agreement⁴ concluded between the Ministry of the Interior and the IMM Members (Croatian Academy of Medical Sciences (CAMS); Croatian Academy of Legal Sciences (CALS); Centre for Cultural Dialogue (CCD); Croatian Red Cross (CRC); and Prof. Dr. Iris Goldner Lang (in her personal capacity). In 2025 the Centre for Balkan Criminology and Security (CBCS) joined the IMM.

The IMM is not a ‘complaint’ or an ‘internal affairs’ oversight body, since such entities already exist in Croatia (e.g. State Attorney’s Office, Ombudsman, MOI’s Internal Control Department).⁵ Its establishment marked “the beginning of an impartial, independent, and expert dialogue with the MOI, not solely aimed at detecting and prosecuting individual illegal conduct by police officers but also at identifying normative, institutional, systemic, operational, technical, and ultimately human factors contributing to or causing such conduct.”⁶ It should be

¹ See official statistics at <https://podaci.dzs.hr/2025/en/97256>.

² “Green border” is an informal term widely used in Croatia to describe the territory between official land border control points.

³ Article 10 of the Screening Regulation ([Regulation \(EU\) 2024/1356 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 introducing the screening of third-country nationals at the external borders](#) and amending Regulations (EC) No 767/2008, (EU) 2017/2226, (EU) 2018/1240 and (EU) 2019/817). See also [Monitoring fundamental rights during screening and the asylum border procedure – A guide on national independent mechanisms | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#).

⁴ The consolidated text of the Cooperation Agreement of 29 April 2025 is available at [https://www.nmn.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Consolidated Text of the Cooperation Agreement adopted 29.04.2025..pdf?vel=209395](https://www.nmn.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Consolidated%20Text%20of%20the%20Cooperation%20Agreement%20adopted%2029.04.2025.pdf?vel=209395)

⁵ Semi-Annual Report of the IMM (November 2022 – June 2023 – December 2023 – July 2024), p. 3, available at <https://www.nmn.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/SEMI-ANNUAL%20REPORT%20-%202024.pdf?vel=1897403>

⁶ Ibid.

noted that “at the time of its establishment, no comparable specialised (civil) police oversight mechanism existed in Europe in the area of irregular migration. There were no similar European mechanisms or established best practice guidelines to serve as a model for this Mechanism.”⁷

The IMM’s activities include (1) “monitoring of the actions of police officers and their respect for fundamental rights of irregular migrants and applicants for international protection in enforcing the regulations governing state border control and international protection” (monitoring of police actions); (2) “access to individual files”; and (3) “access to the activities and reports of the General Police Directorate regarding an alleged illegal action towards irregular migrants and applicants for international protection”.⁸ These activities may be carried out “at the external border, including the green border, at border crossing points / in police stations / police administrations of the Republic of Croatia with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and the Republic of Serbia as well as in reception centres and reception centres for foreigners.”⁹

The Ministry of the Interior “provides support to the Independent Monitoring Mechanism by appointing a contact officer ... to ensure smooth and timely exchange of information and performance of other tasks enabling the implementation of Independent Monitoring Mechanism’s activities”. The contact should “deliver statistical reports to the monitors for the previous month containing information on all irregular migrants and applicants for international protection, on migration trends at the Croatian external border, including basic risk assessment parameters for the forthcoming month, registered intentions of international protection applications, illegal entry, movement and stay in the territory of Croatia as well as cases of migrant smuggling.”¹⁰

The IMM Coordination Board “professionally directs and manages the activities of the Independent Monitoring Mechanism, prepares periodic reports on its work for the Advisory Board and the Ministry of the Interior, a recommendation for the implementation of national monitoring mechanisms in accordance with the provisions of the Pact on Migration and Asylum for the Ministry of the Interior, an annual report on the actions of police officers of the Ministry of the Interior in the area of border protection, illegal migration and international protection, with special emphasis on the respect of fundamental rights, the principle of non-refoulement, the prohibition of collective expulsion, the prohibition of torture or other forms of ill-treatment on the basis of the monitors’ individual reports and performs other tasks regarding the management of the Independent Monitoring Mechanism.”¹¹

The Advisory Board, currently chaired by the Frontex Fundamental Rights Officer, receives reports from and issues recommendations to the Coordination Board.

The IMM Monitors are fully independent and completely autonomous. They “oversee the actions of police officers of the Ministry of the Interior and whether they respect fundamental rights of irregular migrants and applicants for international protection in enforcing the regulations governing state border control and the provision of international protection.” The IMM Monitors perform announced and unannounced monitoring activities.

The IMM is granted full access to the data of the Ministry of the Interior’s information system, case files and locations, although it has no investigative powers.

While monitoring activities were reduced in the past, the situation has been drastically improved in 2025, and the number of monitoring activities rapidly grew in the first six months of 2025, having received more funds although there is still no full-time staff employed in IMM.¹²

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Article 8 of the consolidated Cooperation Agreement

⁹ Article 6 of the consolidated Cooperation Agreement

¹⁰ Article 5 of the consolidated Cooperation Agreement

¹¹ Article 3 of the consolidated Cooperation Agreement

¹² <https://www.nmn.hr/featured/imm-in-numbers-monitorings-almost-tripled-in-the-1st-half-of-2025/65>

During the mission the Coordination Board of the IMM were optimistic about the future of the IMM and highly motivated to keep up their quality work with further support by the authorities.

Migrant children

According to official data for 2024, the number of children recorded crossing the borders irregularly was 6,936, of which 1,340 were unaccompanied children.¹³ The Rules on accommodation in reception centres for foreigners and methods of calculation of costs of forced removal have recently been adopted (Official Gazette no. 137/23) to the effect that, when making decisions about accommodation, the best interest of the child and the vulnerability caused by previous stressful events and the effect of accommodation on their psychological state must be taken into account. The available data demonstrates that placement of children in temporary accommodation centres is rarely used and lasts no more than ten days. The conditions and infrastructure of transit centres have been notably improved, and children accommodated in them benefit from tailored daily activities.¹⁴

Unaccompanied migrant children are assigned a legal guardian by the Social Welfare Centre responsible for representing them in all legal matters, including asylum procedures. They are accommodated in “Centres for Community Service Provision” (*CPUZ*, “*Centar za pružanje usluga u zajednici*”). However, the Croatian authorities often face difficulties when trying to render appropriate services to unaccompanied foreign minors as the vast majority of them only spend a few days, if not hours, in Croatia before moving, mostly, to other Schengen Area States.

Overall, Croatia is deeply committed to promoting the rights of the child, including the rights of the children on the move, and has invested considerable efforts in improving the infrastructure and services rendered to migrant children, including unaccompanied foreign minors.

Conclusion

The first country mission undertaken by the DMR was a success thanks to the Croatian authorities’ cooperation and openness to exchanges on the above issues, who supplied a wealth of information on the functioning of the IMM, as well as on the reception and protection of migrant children in Croatia.

In the course of the meetings with the State authorities, the DMR offered the Council of Europe’s expertise and tailor-made capacity-building activities to support the Croatian authorities in efficiently tackling the challenges of migration.

The country mission has enabled the DMR to identify areas in which the Council of Europe may render practical assistance to the authorities of Croatia such as: exploring synergies with the IMM and other similar European institutions in order to further reinforce the existing IMM methodology and its efficiency; through the Council of Europe Network of Focal Points on Migration, the [European National Preventive Mechanisms \(NPMs\) Forum \(ENPMF\)](#), managed by DGI, and the collection of information on the concrete plans that may exist in other Council of Europe member States to create independent border monitoring mechanisms in line notably with Article 10 of the EU Screening Regulation; and offering training on the Council of Europe human rights standards to the IMM Monitors and other competent authorities.

The country mission has also allowed the DMR to observe the good practices in the area of social inclusion and integration of migrants and refugees. The initiative of the City of Zagreb to establish a centre functioning both as a knowledge hub and a space for social interaction

¹³ Ombudswoman for Children, Report on the work of the Ombudswoman for Children in 2024, p. 199, <https://dijete.hr/hr/download/izvjesce-o-radu-pravobraniteljice-za-djecu-za-2024-godinu/>; See also ECRE AIDA Country Report Croatia, Update 2024, p. 27, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/AIDA-HR_2024-Update.pdf.

¹⁴ [CM/Del/Dec\(2025\)1531/H46-14](#)

that is accessible to asylum seekers, refugees and foreign migrant workers deserves the highest praise and represents a good practice that could be replicated in other member States.

In conclusion, this first country mission by the DMR has demonstrated that there is a need and will on the part of Croatia, similarly to other member States, to enhance cooperation with the Council of Europe in the area of migration and asylum, and that the work of the DMR has concrete added value in ensuring that the increasing challenges of migration are tackled most efficiently in a manner compliant with the Council of Europe standards.