



CROATIA

EurOMo Country Report 2025

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Introduction

The Croatian media landscape in 2025 is marked by a paradox. On the one hand, formal ownership transparency has improved through the launch of a centralized database under the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM). For the first time, the public can access consolidated data on owners, beneficial owners and financial income – an important step compared to the earlier patchwork of fragmented registries. On the other hand watchdogs such as Gong (2024) warned that hidden ownership remains a serious risk, while both the European Commission’s 2024 and 2025 Rule of Law Reports underlined that ultimate ownership structures are not always clear and that the framework for fair and transparent distribution of state advertising continues to raise concerns at both national and local levels, with no meaningful reforms undertaken (European Commission, 2024; European Commission, 2025).

However, deeper structural vulnerabilities continue to persist. The collapse of private print distribution networks forced the state-owned Croatian Post to step in, while public broadcaster HRT faces major restructuring amid continuous accusations of political bias. Independent outlets remain financially fragile and foreign-owned broadcasters are exposed to corporate decisions made abroad. At the same time, nearly 700 active SLAPP lawsuits, the controversial “Lex AP” amendment criminalising leaks from non-public investigations, and weak protections for journalistic sources further erode editorial independence (Freedom House, 2025; MFRR, 2025). Croatia fell to 60th place out of 180 countries in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index, compared to 48th place in 2024 (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

These conditions show that while Croatia has advanced in formal transparency, the foundations of independent journalism remain fragile. Registers can reveal ownership, but real autonomy depends on fair financing, sustainable distribution, effective regulation, and secure working conditions for journalists. Without progress in these areas, ownership transparency will remain a necessary but insufficient safeguard for media freedom and pluralism.

Outlets and owners

In 2025, Croatia’s media ownership has been formally more transparent than ever before. The centralized database launched by the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) consolidates information on owners, beneficial owners, financing, and – as has been announced – state subsidies, replacing the earlier system of eleven fragmented registries (Faktograf, 2023; HND, 2023). This marks progress toward EU standards, but international and domestic assessments agree that transparency on paper has not translated into stronger independence in practice (European Commission, 2025; Freedom House, 2025). Ownership records are often incomplete or outdated, particularly for large corporate groups, and they seldom reveal the actual balance of power behind media companies.

Croatia’s media landscape combines large foreign-owned groups, several strong domestic publishers, and a wide range of smaller outlets that cater to specific audiences. Overall, the structure of ownership itself remains dual: foreign capital dominates the most profitable commercial broadcasters and tabloids, while domestic owners – often with ties to political or business elites – control much of the print and digital press. The most powerful foreign players include Styria Media Group, which controls *Večernji list* and *24sata*, and CME/PPF, which owns *RTL Hrvatska*. United Group/United Media, ultimately controlled by the UK-based private equity fund BC Partners and businessman Dragan Šolak, operates both *Nova TV* and *N1 Croatia*. On the domestic

side, Hanza Media remains a dominant publisher with *Jutarnji list*, *Slobodna Dalmacija* and *Sportske novosti*. Meanwhile, the public service broadcaster HRT, despite its size, remains frequently criticised for political bias and weak independence (Freedom House, 2024; European Commission, 2025).

At the same time, several independent domestic outlets operate outside of these structures. Although their resources are more limited compared to the large groups, they play an important role in maintaining pluralism. Independent voices such as *Telegram* and *Nacional* continue to play an important role despite financial fragility. Furthermore, *Index.hr* is one of the most visited digital portals, while *Faktograf.hr* has gained recognition as Croatia's main fact-checking platform. *Srednja.hr* has carved out a niche with younger audiences, and *Istra24* focuses on investigative journalism at the regional level. On the other side of the spectrum, explicitly right-leaning publications such as *Direktno.hr* and *Hrvatski tjednik* target conservative audiences and shape parts of the public debate.

A growing share of political communication, however, now unfolds directly on social platforms. Some mainstream brands, such as *24sata* (1.7 million followers on Facebook) and *Dnevnik.hr* (1 million), reach larger audiences online than through their print or broadcast channels. YouTube has become a central arena: *N1infoTV* counts over 627,000 subscribers, while opinion-driven shows like *Podcast Inkubator* attract sizeable followings. *Pixsell*, a leading photo and video agency, uses its YouTube channel (77,800 subscribers) mainly for visual content distribution. On the far-right end of the spectrum, *Bujica* (Z1 TV) and *Projekt Velebit* use YouTube to promote nationalist and conservative narratives that also resonate with parts of the online audience.

Other platforms are likewise gaining prominence, particularly in shaping political engagement. On TikTok, *Politika za GenZ* (12,600 followers) explains current developments on the Croatian political scene in formats tailored to younger audiences. Meanwhile, on Instagram, *Grof Darkula* has built a community of more than 75,000 followers by presenting itself as a “virtual corner for feminism, politics, queer culture, art and science.” Operating under anonymity, Grof Darkula's profile has transitioned from providing light entertainment to engaging in social activism, blurring the boundaries between influencer, civil society actor and alternative media voice.

Key news agencies and providers add another layer. HINA, the state-owned news agency, remains a central source for the press, although its recent leadership changes have raised concerns about potential political influence (Index.hr, 2025a; SNH, 2025a). In September 2025, the outgoing Management Board appointed former HRT director Siniša Kovačić as HINA's new head, despite his controversial past at the public broadcaster HRT and political ties. According to the Croatian Union of Journalists (SNH), the procedure – carried out under outdated rules not aligned with the EU Media Freedom Act (EMFA) – highlights how public service media appointments in Croatia remain vulnerable to political influence (SNH, 2025a).

The broader radio sector in Croatia includes both national networks – such as *Otvoreni Radio* and *Bravo*, the main commercial players in the market – as well as the public broadcaster *Hrvatski radio*, which operates three national channels. In addition, there are 12 regional and more than 100 local stations (DZS, 2025). A major player is *Media Servis*, a private radio news agency that provides content to dozens of local stations. Together with *Bravo* and five other stations, it shares the same address and is informally referred to as the “Radio Hub.” With the exception of *Media Servis* and *Top Radio*, the stations within the Hub are formally owned by different individuals. Nonetheless, in recent years there has been considerable speculation about the real ownership and control of several of these outlets (Paparella, 2019; Jelinić, 2021).

Recent developments & case notes

Events of 2025 vividly demonstrate how ownership structures in Croatia translate into vulnerabilities. The year began with turbulence at *N1 Croatia*, which operates under Adria News d.o.o. within the United Group. Without a national terrestrial concession, *N1* depends on cable and IPTV carriage and primarily reaches urban, politically engaged audiences. Its reorganisation and a significant number of layoffs in early 2025 highlighted the fragility of foreign-owned niche broadcasters, whose sustainability is tied to corporate decisions made outside Croatia (N1, 2025).

These vulnerabilities deepened in June, when United Group itself entered a governance crisis. Founder Dragan Šolak, a Serbian entrepreneur long associated with regional capital in media, and CEO Viktorija Boklag were dismissed. Both launched lawsuits in London and the Netherlands, claiming retaliation. Their removal marked a decisive shift from regional founders to transnational investors. The turmoil reverberated in Croatia, where journalists from *N1* and *Nova TV* co-signed an appeal to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, warning that such instability in ownership could pave the way for political interference and undermine editorial independence (Nacional, 2025a).

A different type of shock came in July with the closure of *Al Jazeera Balkans* (AJB), part of the Al Jazeera Media Network. From its Sarajevo headquarters and Zagreb bureau, AJB had provided regional coverage for over a decade, available in Croatia via pay-TV platforms. Live news programming ceased on 12 July, and by the end of the month the channel went fully off air. More than 200 media workers across the region lost their jobs. No official explanation was given, but the shutdown removed a significant regional news voice from Croatia's media landscape. The Croatian Journalists' Union described the closure as "a new erosion of the space for freedom and truth" (SNH, 2025b).

On the 1st of August, the independent *Radio Nacional*, a DAB+ digital station linked to the weekly *Nacional*, was abruptly shut down after its concession was not renewed. Staff were notified only a day in advance. As editor-in-chief Zrinka Vrabec Mojzeš told *Index*: "Croatia's media landscape is in a worse situation than in the 1990s... Back then there were independent voices like Radio 101, Feral Tribune, Novi list and Nacional. Today, under the umbrella of the EU, independent media that should be supported in the name of pluralism are disappearing" (Index.hr, 2025b).

Finally, the minority weekly *Novosti*, funded through cultural autonomy programmes, faced a 35 percent cut in state support in 2025, which is regarded as a concession by the ruling centre-right party to its minority, far-right coalition partner. While the outlet did not close, the funding reduction raised concerns that subsidies—intended to safeguard pluralism—can instead be used selectively, weakening critical or minority voices (Faktograf, 2025a).

Together, these cases underscore how different ownership models – whether foreign-owned broadcasters, regional networks, or domestically rooted independents – remain vulnerable in Croatia. Some falter under corporate restructuring and investor decisions, others fall victim to opaque licensing or selective funding, and still others disappear entirely, leaving the media landscape thinner and more fragile.

Distribution

In Croatia, traditional (linear) media such as television, radio, and print remain important, especially in rural areas and among older audiences. Yet the trend is clear: younger and urban populations are increasingly turning to non-linear sources like online portals, social media, and mobile apps. The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025* shows that digital news consumption continues to rise: 77 percent of Croatians access news online each week, while 64 percent rely on television and 21 percent on print. With smartphones as the main devices for news consumption, social media platforms that dominate among Croatians are Facebook (69 percent), YouTube (66 percent), and WhatsApp (65 percent), with Facebook and YouTube serving as leading news gateways (Peruško, 2025).

By contrast, the distribution of print media is in deep crisis. According to the Croatian Competition Agency (AZTN), total circulation of daily newspapers fell by 15 percent in 2023 compared to 2022, to just under 28 million copies annually, while weeklies also declined, though less sharply (AZTN, 2023). The downward trend continued in 2024, with circulation of dailies dropping by another 14 percent, and weeklies by 5 percent. The tabloid *24sata* remained the best-selling daily, while far-right *Hrvatski tjednik* led among weeklies (AZTN, 2024). As private distributors retreated, newspaper delivery to kiosks and smaller towns became increasingly unprofitable, threatening access in many parts of the country.

Faced with this collapse, the state intervened. In 2025, the government declared print distribution a service of “general economic interest” and tasked *Croatian Post (Hrvatska pošta)* with nationwide delivery. The five-year contract is worth about €90.1 million plus VAT, with the market value estimated at €140 million (Forbes, 2025). To sustain the system, the state committed €14.7 million annually in subsidies, while publishers pay only symbolic fees. In practice, Croatian Post now ensures delivery to more than 3,000 kiosks, stabilising a network that private companies abandoned (Nacional, 2025b; Index, 2025c).

While this intervention has prevented the disappearance of newspapers from kiosks, it also raises concerns about transparency and fairness. Journalists’ organisations warn that without clear and public criteria, state subsidies and delivery arrangements could privilege certain publishers, turning distribution into another tool of political influence. Moreover, with sales declining and costs rising, many publishers remain financially fragile despite state support. For rural communities, the risk of “news deserts” persists if subsidies are cut or politically conditioned.

Main risks to transparency

On paper, Croatia has made progress in disclosing ownership structures. The launch of the centralized database under the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) in 2025 consolidated information on owners, beneficial owners, financing, and – as has been announced – state subsidies. Yet this formal improvement does not eliminate deeper risks. The new database does not always capture beneficial owners within large corporate groups, and regulators have little authority to investigate beyond formal declarations.

Ownership appears relatively transparent, but suspicions of concealed control persist. The 2024 case of Z1 Television illustrated this: journalists questioned whether declared owners reflected reality, while AEM publicly admitted that it relies only on formal declarations and has no authority to investigate further. Civil society organisations such as Gong warned that “transparency is not a technical issue but a matter of public interest and pluralism. If AEM accepts only formal

statements from license holders, hidden owners and their interests can remain invisible.” (Gong, 2024).

Economic control presents the most severe risks. Transparency of financial flows is limited, especially for television, online outlets, and hybrid platforms. There is little clarity about advertising markets, revenue streams, or public subsidies. Reports by watchdogs have flagged *non-transparent state advertising* that tends to favour politically aligned outlets and distort competition (MFRR, 2025). Gong’s 2022 analysis further showed that public companies and state bodies often fail to disclose how much they spend on media advertising or the criteria used (Gong, 2022). For instance, HEP allocated millions annually to outlets such as *Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list*, with noticeable declines in critical coverage after campaigns, illustrating how state advertising can function as a subtle form of censorship (Gong, 2022).

The *IPI report* (Reljanović & Gherasimov, 2024) also emphasises that funding at the national level is allocated without clear criteria, functioning as a mechanism of political influence rather than a safeguard for pluralism. At the local level, *Local Media for Democracy – Croatia* (Vozab & Čuvalo, 2024) documents how many regional outlets depend almost entirely on municipal or county subsidies, often assigned in non-transparent ways that encourage outlets to republish official press releases rather than produce independent journalism. Independent outlets such as *Novosti* (–35% funding cut in 2025) and *Radio Nacional* (closure after concession non-renewal) show how selective funding or licensing decisions can operate as indirect mechanisms of control (Faktograf, 2025a; Index, 2025b).

At first glance, the risks associated with management and ownership relations appear minimal, as editors and directors are typically identifiable, and few politicians appear as formal owners. In practice, however, political influence remains entrenched – especially at HRT, the public service broadcaster. Beyond long-standing criticism of biased coverage and politicised appointments (Freedom House, 2024; European Commission, 2025), HRT entered a major restructuring process in 2025. The government adopted the *Plan for the Consolidation of Work and Operations of HRT*, which proposes changes to its functional concept, the transformation of its business and operational model, and detailed organisational and staffing reforms. The plan foresees cutting around 800 jobs – roughly a third of the workforce – with severance packages ranging from €20,000 to €70,000 depending on years of service (Faktograf, 2025b; Nacional, 2025c). Journalists’ organisations have warned that such restructuring risks weaken HRT’s ability to fulfil its public service mandate, especially if implemented without clear editorial safeguards. The Croatian Journalists’ Union described the plan as “a document made only for the sake of being made,” criticising its lack of vision for strengthening independence and quality journalism (SNH, 2025c). In this context, financial pressures and political influence intersect, creating uncertainty about HRT’s future role and capacity to provide an independent and sustainable public service.

International assessments underline these structural problems. Freedom House downgraded Croatia’s score for free and independent media from 3/4 in 2024 to 2/4 in 2025, citing the chilling effect of Article 307a of the Criminal Code (“Lex AP”), persistent SLAPP lawsuits, and ongoing political pressure on the public broadcaster. By mid-2025, at least 696 SLAPP lawsuits were active, many initiated by politicians or judges (European Commission, 2025). The MFRR mission to Croatia in June 2025 echoed these concerns, pointing to the continued use of criminal defamation, weak anti-SLAPP protections, and the incomplete coverage of the new ownership database (MFRR, 2025). The EU Rule of Law Report likewise noted that, while registries have improved, enforcement remains weak: state advertising criteria are absent, the regulator lacks independence from parliamentary majorities, and political influence over HRT persists (European Commission, 2025).

Taken together, these findings show that the main risks to transparency in Croatia do not stem from the absence of registers, but from their limited enforcement and systemic vulnerabilities: financial fragility, selective distribution of subsidies and advertising, and political capture of regulators. Ownership transparency has improved in theory, but in practice the conditions for independent journalism remain fragile.

Legal Framework

Croatia's media and communications sector is regulated by a wide set of legislative acts. The Media Law (2004) establishes the general framework for media operations, while the Electronic Media Act (2021) specifically governs radio, television, and online publications. The Croatian News Agency Act (2001) defines the role and functioning of the national news agency. Public service broadcasting is regulated by the Law on the Croatian Radio-Television (2010).

In addition, broader regulatory instruments affect the media landscape, including the Electronic Communications Act (2022), the Competition Protection Act (2021), and the Act on the Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism (2022). More recently, Croatia transposed European legislation through the Act on the Implementation of Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 (the Digital Services Act) in 2025, thereby aligning national rules with EU standards on the digital market and online platforms.

The Croatian legal framework addressing transparency in media ownership and control is anchored primarily in sector-specific legislation, supplemented by broader regulatory instruments. The Media Law provides the earliest and most comprehensive set of obligations in this field. These obligations establish a baseline of ownership and funding transparency, while also introducing anti-concentration and management provisions. The Electronic Media Act builds on this framework in the digital and broadcasting domains. It ensures that radio, television, and electronic publications disclose relevant ownership and funding information, and it further embeds anti-concentration measures.

Beyond the core media laws, several related acts also touch upon ownership transparency. The Act on the Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism indirectly strengthens transparency by requiring disclosure of beneficial owners, thereby making information on foreign or indirect ownership of media entities accessible through the Register of Beneficial Owners. In parallel, the Competition Protection Act addresses market concentration in a more general sense but has direct implications for media pluralism and control.

Croatia's regulatory framework on media ownership transparency appears extensive but reveals persistent shortcomings in practice. Formal obligations for ownership and funding disclosure exist, yet enforcement is weak and sanctions are seldom applied, resulting in transparency that is more declarative than substantive. Provisions designed to safeguard public service media are frequently undermined by political influence over management. Registers intended to reveal beneficial ownership have improved access to data but still suffer from gaps in accuracy and usability. Broader competition and market rules formally address concentration but remain insufficient to capture the specific risks of cross-ownership and covert control in the media sector.

According to the Croatian Journalists' Union (SNH), the Ministry of Culture and Media missed a key opportunity in 2025 to align national legislation with the goals of the EU Media Freedom Act (EMFA). Instead of strengthening existing provisions, SNH argues, the Ministry's draft law reduces

EMFA to a bureaucratic exercise. In their view, it fails to address the main problems that undermine press freedom in Croatia: political and economic pressures, non-transparent advertising practices, insufficient protection of journalistic sources, the lack of independence of regulatory bodies, and precarious working conditions in the sector (SNH, 2025a).

SNH further stresses that the draft law excludes important safeguards for public service broadcasters such as HRT and HINA, does not reform procedures for appointing leadership, and neglects to introduce mechanisms for greater transparency and accountability. The union also highlights the absence of a collective agreement for media workers – a central EU strategic objective – as evidence that reforms are treated as a matter of formal compliance rather than genuine protection of media freedom (SNH, 2025d).

Conclusion

By 2025, Croatia has taken steps toward formal transparency in media ownership with the creation of a centralized database under the Agency for Electronic Media. Yet this improvement highlights a deeper paradox: transparency on paper does not automatically translate into independence in practice. Political influence over the public broadcaster, the absence of clear rules for state advertising, selective subsidies, and financial fragility across the sector continue to undermine media freedom.

The central challenge is therefore not disclosure itself, but ensuring that disclosure matters. Stronger safeguards in financing, distribution, and regulation are needed to prevent transparency from becoming a merely symbolic exercise. Without measures to curb political interference, guarantee fair allocation of public funds, and protect journalists from legal harassment, Croatia's progress risks remaining superficial. In addition, persistent suspicions of hidden ownership and informal control by political and business elites highlight how influence can remain obscured even when registers appear complete.

In the future, the effectiveness of the new EU Media Freedom Act will depend on whether it can be incorporated in Croatia's legal and institutional framework in a way that strengthens enforcement and accountability. Only then can ownership transparency evolve from a mere list of names to a genuine foundation for media independence, pluralism, and public trust.

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