

In the context of the right to participation in public life and decision making processes, the Anti-discrimination Act provides for the protection and promotion of equality as the highest value of the constitutional order of the Republic of Croatia, creates prerequisites for the realization of equal opportunities and regulates protection against discrimination on multiple grounds, including age. The Anti-discrimination Act applies to the conduct of all state bodies, bodies of local and regional self-government units, legal persons vested with public authority, and to the conduct of all legal and natural persons. Discrimination, including age discrimination, is prohibited in all areas of life.

It should be stated that Croatian public administration has been undergoing digitalization, which is welcomed, as it enables citizens with quicker and easier access to basic public services offered by the administration, but as the Ombudswoman has highlighted, it can also have an impact on the realization of older persons' rights.

In Croatia the government has set up a portal for information and e-services of the Republic of Croatia 'e-Citizen', which can be used by all Croatian citizens, digital nomads and all foreign nationals (EU, non-EU, EEA) with temporary residence in Croatia. According to statistics provided by the Central government office for the development of digital society, 19.6% of the users of the e-Citizen were over 65. At the same time, according to the 2022 Population census, 22.6 % of the population of Croatia is over 65.

The Ombudswoman has been highlighting that although some older persons have the necessary digital skills, some do not, and so public services need to remain accessible in the traditional form as well, especially for those without Internet access or a suitable device. It is also important to take into account the intersectionality of age and other grounds, for instance disability, education, but especially socio-economic status.

Poverty is unfortunately a specific challenge to participation of older persons in public life more generally. Namely, every third older person is at the risk of poverty, while every second older person living alone is at risk of poverty. This reflects on all aspects of personal life and participation, from food and medication to ability to travel, take part in cultural events etc. It is also connected to the use of digital services as particularly older persons in risk of poverty are less likely to be able to use public services online due to not having the needed devices such as smartphones, computers etc. and/or not having Internet, or some unfortunately not even having electricity.

Additionally, in relation to participation in public life and decision-making processes - when it comes to legislative changes and new policies, all public consultations are organized in the online format.

Research conducted by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) suggests that digital skills and modern technological tools are crucial for participating in public life. The research also showed that there is little evidence of national initiatives to provide digital skills training for older persons or to offer financial support for reliable internet access or up-to-date devices and software. Furthermore, only one in four people aged 65 to 74 in the 27 EU Member States have at least basic digital skills. As public consultations and policy discussions are increasingly

carried out online, older persons may face not being able to exercise their civil and political rights.

When it comes to participation in different consultative/advisory bodies, at the state level the National Council for Pensioners was established which includes representatives of different ministries and state bodies and older persons association. The Council is a special advisory body which serves as a forum for continuous dialogue with government representatives established in regard to pensions, health insurance, social policies and the rights of older persons. Equally so, several Croatian counties have recently formed councils and committees for older persons in order to include their voices in decision making at the regional level.

In relation to freedom of association, it is guaranteed under the Croatian Constitution, and everyone is guaranteed the right to public assembly and peaceful protest.

There are several associations focusing on the rights of older persons. The National Pensioners' Convention of Croatia (NPCC, Matica umirovljenika Hrvatske) is one of the largest organization of older persons in Croatia, with 278,000 members, 359 organizations and over 811 branches and clubs from all municipalities, cities and counties. Among many issues, they engage their members in cultural and artistic activities, sports, entertainment, recreation and preventive health related activities and the NPCC also provides its members with member discounts on products and services.

Another important association advocating for rights of older persons is the Croatian Pensioner Syndicate, focused on the improvement of social and economic right of pensioners and older persons.

In the context of voting rights, all Croatian citizens who are over eighteen years old are entitled to universal and equal suffrage. In the case of older voters who are, at the time of the election, unable to reach the polling station, the polling committee will dispatch several of its members to the voter's home where he/she will vote, and his/her ballot will be sealed in an envelope. The envelope with the folded ballot will be unsealed at the polling station and the folded ballot will be inserted in the ballot box. As a positive example, a number of LTC facilities also have polling stations and some offer organized transport to the polling station to their residents.

As for remedies, any person who believes that their right to participate in public life and in decision-making processes is violated can submit a complaint to the Ombudswoman - or to the State Election Committee in relation to elections.