

Society

# Policy Brief: Education plays a crucial role to prevent the rehabilitation of extremist ideologies in Croatia

by EWB 23. 10. 2023.



*Flags of the EU and Croatia; Photo: Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

VIENNA – Cooperation between authorities, civil society, historians, human rights experts, and representatives of minority communities should be enhanced to jointly confront the past, promote democratic values, and prevent the rehabilitation of extremist ideologies, recommends Policy Brief [“Balancing Freedom of Expression and Democracy: The Case of the ‘Za Dom Spremni’ Greeting in Croatia”](#), published within the WB2E Network.

framework, and diverse perspectives. It highlights debates among historians, political organizations, and minority communities, shedding light on the complexity of balancing free expression and democratic values in confronting the country's past.

The author recommends that by developing a culture of memory and highlighting historical facts, educational institutions must provide the younger generation with a better understanding of how totalitarian regimes were operated and the dangers of emphasizing their characteristics in public space.

“Media campaigns, public discussions, and clear condemnation of the ‘Za dom spremni (ZDS)’ by social, political, and religious leaders are essential to raising awareness of this symbol’s negative consequences and harmful nature”, the Policy Brief recommends.

It is explained that using “ZDS” in public space in Croatia symbolizes an ideology promoting nationalism, racism, antisemitism, and the persecution of minority groups. However, it is added that some historians argue that ZDS has alternative connotations.

“These historians consider context and interpretation when assessing the greeting’s historical significance. They note the post-World War II ban and subsequent diverse political use of the ‘ZDS’. Also, some veterans organizations argue that banning these symbols degrades the sacrifice of their fallen members”, Policy Brief underlines.



bishops, and other dignitaries, with the support of some veteran organizations. However, the petition lacked broad public support and had no policy impact.

It is said that the Croatian constitution rejects the postulates of the NDH regarding its character policies and legislation. The salutation “ZDS” violates the principles of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the European Convention of Human Rights, and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, as well as the recommendations of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. However, the author explains that there is a lot of inconsistency in the case law in Croatia, naming some court verdicts related to the use of ZDS.

“The Government of Croatia amended the Law on Misdemeanours in March 2023, raising the fines for misdemeanours, which include public pronouncement of the greeting ‘ZDS’. Light offenses may incur fines of up to 1,000 EUR, while severe offenses may result in fines of up to 4,000 EUR. Spreading fake news and publicly uttering ‘ZDS’ will be considered grave offenses”, the author explains.

He adds that through the increase in penalties, the government is promoting democratic values more effectively in a society where totalitarian symbols have no place.

“Additionally, increasing penalties aims to reduce intolerance, division, and violence. It is important to note that symbols have power and can inspire



from arising. A time increase may also be part of a broader effort to confront the past, especially the period of the Second World War”, Policy Brief said.

The author underlines that education plays a crucial role in promoting democratic values, human rights, tolerance, and respect for diversity, adding that the creation of an inclusive and open social environment is also crucial on a sociopolitical level.

“It involves promoting dialogue, confronting the past, encouraging critical thinking, and actively comparing discrimination, intolerance, and hatred”, the author concludes.

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