FINANCING OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN CROATIA: LEGAL FRAMEWORK, OVERSIGHT AND TRANSPARENCY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The paper analysed the legal regulation of the financing of political parties and election campaigns in the Republic of Croatia, focusing on the Act on the Financing of Political Activities, Election Campaigns and Referendums, in force since 1 January 2020. It assessed whether the Act ensures transparency, a level playing field and effective oversight, and identified the gaps that persisted after the 2024 parliamentary and the 2025 local elections. Normative, comparative and documentary methods were applied to the statutory text, Council of Europe and OSCE/ODIHR standards, the European Commission 2025 Rule of Law Report and scholarship published between 2019 and 2026. The results showed that Croatia has a formally comprehensive framework, with dominant public funding, donation and spending ceilings, pre- and post-election reporting and online publication. However, significant weaknesses were found: financial ceilings have not been indexed since 2019 and were only mechanically converted into euro; loans, third-party campaigning and online political advertising remain unregulated at national level; donations from public contractors are allowed; and a review period of about 30 days and the limited capacity of the State Electoral Commission weaken oversight. The paper proposed automatic indexation of ceilings, rules on loans and third parties, implementation of Regulation (EU) 2024/900, a longer oversight period and a graduated and public sanctions regime.

Keywords: political party financing, election campaigns, Croatia, transparency, State Electoral Commission, financial oversight.

1. Introduction

The financing of political parties and election campaigns is one of the most sensitive points of any democratic system. Money is indispensable for parties to function, to communicate with citizens and to compete in elections, yet the same money can turn into an instrument of invisible influence over public decision-making. For this reason, European standards require the regulation of political finance to strike a balance between freedom of political activity, equality of opportunity in the contest and transparency towards the voter (OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission, 2020).

The Republic of Croatia is a case of particular interest for the region. As a Member State of the European Union since 2013, it has gone through several generations of laws on political finance and, since 1 January 2020, has applied a new unified act which regulates in a single instrument the regular annual financing of parties, the financing of election campaigns and the financing of referendum activities (Zakon o financiranju političkih aktivnosti, izborne promidžbe i referenduma [ZFPA], 2019). The Croatian Constitution, for its part, obliges political parties to account publicly for the origin of their funds and assets (Ustav Republike Hrvatske, 2014, Article 6). The Croatian experience, with its achievements and weaknesses, is relevant for the countries of the Western Balkans, including Kosovo and North Macedonia, which are harmonising their legislation with European standards.

This paper seeks to answer three research questions: (1) how does Croatian law regulate the public and private financing of political entities and campaigns; (2) how effective are the reporting, oversight and sanctioning mechanisms in practice, especially in the 2024 and 2025 electoral cycles; and (3) which reforms are needed to bring the system closer to international standards. The hypothesis of the paper is that Croatia has achieved a high level of formal

regulation, but that its effectiveness is limited by outdated financial ceilings, by normative gaps in new areas of financing and by insufficient oversight capacity.
Following this introduction, the second section presents the methodology, the third the international standards and the most recent literature, the fourth analyses the Croatian legal framework and the fifth examines implementation in practice, while the final sections present the findings, recommendations and conclusions.

2. Methodology

The research was built on a qualitative approach and combined four methods. First, the normative method was used to analyse the provisions of the Croatian law in force and of related acts. Second, the comparative method was used to set the Croatian solutions against the standards of the Council of Europe, the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission. Third, document analysis covered the reports of observation missions, legal opinions and reports of European institutions. Fourth, a simple quantitative analysis was conducted of the published data on spending in the 2024 parliamentary campaign.
All financial amounts in the paper are given in euro, which has been the official currency and legal tender of the Republic of Croatia since 1 January 2023. The values of the statutory ceilings are those resulting from the official conversion carried out upon the introduction of the euro, on the basis of European Union law and the Croatian act on the introduction of the euro (Council of the European Union, 2022; Zakon o uvođenju eura, 2022). The sources used date mainly from the period 2019 to 2026, so that the analysis reflects the current legal situation and the most recent scholarly debate.

3. International standards and literature

3.1 Standards of the Council of Europe, the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Union

The fundamental European document in this field remains Recommendation Rec(2003)4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which sets standards for donations, financial transparency, oversight and sanctions in the financing of political parties and election campaigns (Council of Europe, 2003). These principles have been further developed in the joint OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission Guidelines on Political Party Regulation (second edition, 2020), which address the financing, transparency and control of political parties and stress that the oversight body must have sufficient time and resources for a meaningful analysis of financial reports (OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission, 2020, para. 271). At European Union level, the most important development of recent years is Regulation (EU) 2024/900 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, which aims to increase transparency and the identification of sponsors, lays down obligations for the labelling of political advertisements and for transparency notices, restricts targeting techniques and applies for the most part from 10 October 2025 (European Parliament and Council of the EU, 2024, Articles 11, 12, 18, 30). Together, these documents provide the normative basis for analysing the legislation and practice of political party financing in Croatia. For Member States such as Croatia, the Regulation creates the need to designate competent authorities and to link the regulation of online advertising with the national system of political finance.

3.2 Contemporary debate on standards for the financing of political parties and election campaigns

The literature of recent years has shifted attention from the question of whether political finance should be regulated to the question of what effects the different regulatory models produce. A 2026 global study found that political constraints on executive power are strongly associated with the existence of public party funding, but not with the regulation of political finance in general, which suggests that public funding and the control of private finance follow different political logics (McMenamin and Horncastle, 2026). Another study, covering 84 elections in 11 post-communist EU Member States, including Croatia, showed that state funding of parties is associated with lower electoral support for new parties and that this negative effect grows with the size of the subsidy, which lends support to the cartel party thesis (Linek and Škvrňák, 2025).
In Croatian scholarship, Podolnjak analysed the 2019 Act in a comparative perspective and observed that public funding of 0.075% of tax revenue provides parliamentary parties with a stable financial base, but at the same time makes competition harder for new and extra-parliamentary parties; he also considered the ceiling on individual donations relatively high (Podolnjak, 2022). Musa, analysing independent control bodies, underlined that the State Audit Office extends its mandate to political parties as well, which makes it part of the institutional architecture of integrity (Musa, 2019). In the regional context, Transparency International documented in 2023 that the countries of the Western Balkans suffer from similar gaps in the regulation of donors, in the transparency of reporting and in the independence of oversight bodies, which makes comparison with Croatia particularly useful (Transparency International, 2023).

4. The legal framework for the financing of political parties and election campaigns in Croatia

4.1 Scope of the Act and sources of financing

The Act on the Financing of Political Activities, Election Campaigns and Referendums was adopted in 2019 and entered into force on 1 January 2020, replacing the previous act of 2011 (ZFPA, 2019; Podolnjak, 2022). It regulates the financing of political parties, independent members of parliament and councillors, independent lists and candidates, the financing of campaigns for presidential and parliamentary elections, for the European Parliament and for local and regional self-government bodies, as well as the financing of referendum activities. The Act also regulates the oversight of revenue and expenditure, which is entrusted to the State Electoral Commission (Državno izborno povjerenstvo), the State Audit Office (Državni ured za reviziju) and, for the budgetary obligations of local units, the Ministry of Finance (ZFPA, 2019, Article 48). Political parties may obtain income from public funding, membership fees, their own assets, publishing activity, the sale of promotional material, the organisation of party events and donations permitted by law. The Act distinguishes between regular annual financing, which covers routine activities such as salaries, rent, training and communication with citizens, and campaign financing, which includes all contributions and expenditure made for electoral purposes. This distinction is of practical importance, because certain restrictions, such as those on permitted sources, apply to both forms, whereas spending ceilings apply only to the campaign period.

4.2 Public funding

Public funding is the main pillar of the Croatian system. Funds for the regular annual financing of parties and independent members of parliament are provided from the state budget in the amount of 0.075% of tax revenue collected according to the most recently published annual report on budget execution (ZFPA, 2019, Article 5(1)). According to Podolnjak, this percentage corresponded in 2021 to about EUR 8.2 million (Podolnjak, 2022). According to the ODIHR, in 2023 parties and independent members of parliament received EUR 53,445 for each parliamentary seat (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 15). The Act also provides an incentive for gender representation: for each elected woman member, the party receives an additional 10% on top of the amount due for one seat (ZFPA, 2019, Article 9; OSCE/ODIHR, 2026, fn. 63).
The right to regular annual financing from the state budget belongs only to parties which, according to the final results, have won at least one seat in the Croatian Parliament (Sabor), and to independent members of parliament. By analogy, the right to financing from local budgets belongs to the parties and independent councillors elected to the representative bodies of the respective units (ZFPA, 2019, Article 6). Local and regional self-government units determine the amount in their annual budget, but may not go below the statutory minimums per elected member, which are set out in Table 1 (ZFPA, 2019, Article 5(2)).

Table 1. Minimum annual funding amounts per elected member of local representative bodies

Self-government unit	Amount (EUR)
City of Zagreb	1,061.78
County and large city	663.61
Unit with more than 10,000 inhabitants	464.53
Unit with 3,001 to 10,000 inhabitants	265.45
Unit with up to 3,000 inhabitants	132.72

Source: ZFPA (2019), Article 5(2); Zakon o uvođenju eura (2022); authors' elaboration.

In addition to direct funding, the Act also provides for indirect forms of public support, such as free airtime on public radio and television during the campaign and reimbursement of campaign expenses for lists that obtain at least 5% of the valid votes in an electoral unit (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 15). This model makes parliamentary parties highly dependent on the public budget. The 2026 Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) report assessed that parties and campaigns in Croatia are financed mainly from public money (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). This has the advantage of easier control but, as Linek and Škvrňák have shown, it may strengthen the position of established parties to the detriment of new ones (Linek and Škvrňák, 2025).

4.3 Private financing and donation ceilings

Natural and legal persons may make donations to political parties, independent members of parliament and independent councillors, once or several times during the calendar year. Monetary donations are paid into the central account of the party or into the dedicated account of the independent representative, while for donations in goods and services the donor must issue a document certifying their value. For every donation above EUR 663.61, the donor and the recipient are required to conclude a written contract (ZFPA, 2019, Articles 18(5), 25(5)).

The Act sets annual ceilings on the total amount a donor may give to a political entity, which are set out in Table 2. Where these ceilings are exceeded, the recipient must notify the State Audit Office and the State Electoral Commission and transfer the excess amount to the state budget within 15 days (ZFPA, 2019, Article 19). The same ceilings also apply to donations during the campaign. The State Electoral Commission has publicly communicated these ceilings in euro, clarifying that they apply to a party or list regardless of the number of units in which it stands (Hina, 2025).

Table 2. Annual donation ceilings under Croatian law

Donor and recipient	Amount (EUR)
Natural person to a party, independent member of parliament or independent councillor	3,981.68
Legal person to a political party	26,544.56
Legal person to an independent member of parliament	13,272.28
Legal person to an independent councillor	3,981.68
Threshold above which a written contract is required	663.61

Source: ZFPA (2019), Articles 18 and 19; Hina (2025); Zakon o uvođenju eura (2022).

Funds raised for the campaign may not be used for other purposes or for the personal expenses of candidates, such as clothing, repayment of personal debts or expenses of family members. Furthermore, during the campaign, candidates who hold public office are prohibited from using budgetary funds, official premises, official vehicles and equipment of state bodies and self-government units, with the exception of special rules for protected persons. This rule aims to prevent the misuse of administrative resources and conflicts of interest.

An important weakness of this part of the Act is the absence of rules on loans. Candidates and parties may take loans from individuals and banks without any limit on amount or term and without any obligation to disclose the lender and the terms of the loan, which creates a possible route for circumventing the donation ceilings (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 16; OSCE/ODIHR, 2026, paras. 54-57). Likewise, the Act does not prohibit donations from entities holding public procurement contracts, a solution that the ODIHR considered contrary to international standards (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 15; Council of Europe, 2003).

4.4 Limitation of campaign expenditure

Unlike regular annual financing, for which there are no spending ceilings, campaign expenditure is limited by law for each candidate or list. The ceilings are set out in Table 3. Candidates for deputy mayor from among national minorities may spend half of the respective amount (ZFPA, 2019, Article 38).

Table 3. Maximum campaign spending ceilings per candidate or list

Type of election	Amount (EUR)
President of the Republic	1,061,782.47
Croatian Parliament (per electoral unit)	199,084.21
European Parliament	530,891.23
Mayor of Zagreb and list for the City Assembly	106,178.25

Type of election	Amount (EUR)
County prefect and mayor of a large city	63,706.95
Mayor in a unit with more than 10,000 inhabitants	26,544.56
Mayor in a unit with 3,001 to 10,000 inhabitants	10,617.82
Mayor in a unit with up to 3,000 inhabitants	5,308.91

Source: ZFPA (2019), Article 38(1); Hina (2025); Zakon o uvođenju eura (2022).

Effective control of spending ceilings is not straightforward, because many contributions are made in kind, such as publicity materials, billboards, printing, transport or digital services, whose value must be assessed. The difficulty increases in online campaigns, where expenditure on social media advertising is hard to verify and where national law contains no specific rules (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 13). Moreover, the amounts in Table 3 have remained nominally unchanged since 2019. The State Electoral Commission itself, in the proposals it sent to the ODIHR in 2025, acknowledged that many candidates in the 2025 local elections exceeded the ceilings and called for their revision on account of inflation (OSCE/ODIHR, 2026, paras. 24, 28).

4.5 Reporting and transparency

The Act lays down detailed accounting and reporting obligations. Parties must carry out financial transactions in accordance with the applicable acts, keep records of revenue, expenditure and assets, and submit annual financial reports within 60 days of the end of the reporting period (ZFPA, 2019, Article 52(2)). In addition, by 15 July they must submit a six-monthly report on donations received or notify that they have received no donations (ZFPA, 2019, Article 21(1)). Independent members of parliament and councillors have analogous obligations, including opening a dedicated account.
For campaigns, participants open a dedicated bank account, submit reports on donations and expenditure at least seven days before election day, including a report on media expenditure, and submit the final financial report within 30 days after the elections (ZFPA, 2019, Articles 39(1), 40(1); OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 16). All reports are published on the website of the State Electoral Commission. Pre-election reporting is a valuable element, because it gives voters information before they cast their ballots. However, the reporting period begins with the opening of the dedicated account, which may take place up to six months before the elections or only at the moment the lists are submitted, which makes reporting periods unequal among competitors (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 16).

4.6 Prohibited sources of financing

The Act exhaustively lists the sources from which the financing of political entities is prohibited. Donations are prohibited from foreign states, foreign political parties and foreign legal persons; from foreign natural persons, with the exception of EU citizens with permanent or temporary residence in Croatia; from state bodies, public enterprises and legal persons vested with public authority; from companies in which the state or local units hold a share of more than 5%; from trade unions and employers' associations; from foundations and associations run by public officials; from religious communities and humanitarian and non-profit organisations; from local self-government units, except in cases provided for by law; and from persons against whom enforcement proceedings are being conducted for unpaid obligations to the budget (ZFPA, 2019, Article 46(1)). Anonymous donations are also

prohibited, namely those for which, at the time of payment, the name, surname and personal identification number of the natural person or the name and identification number of the legal person are not known (ZFPA, 2019, Article 46(2)). The list of prohibitions is broad and consistent with Recommendation Rec(2003)4. The main omission remains the prohibition or restriction of donations from contractors of the public administration, who are not included in this list (OSCE/ODIHR, 2026, paras. 63-66).

4.7 Oversight, audit and sanctions

The State Electoral Commission collects and publishes the reports, checks their timely and complete submission and carries out financial oversight upon complaint or on its own initiative. It may request information from entities and from public registers, carry out on-site inspections and decide on the suspension or loss of the right to reimbursement. The State Audit Office conducts annual audits of parties and independent representatives, while the Ministry of Finance supervises the obligations of local units (ZFPA, 2019, Article 48; OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, pp. 16-17). Violations of the Act are punishable by fines ranging from EUR 265 to EUR 2,655 for individuals and up to about EUR 13,275 for parties (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 17, fn. 71). The Commission and the Audit Office refer violations to the State Attorney's Office, which decides on prosecution; decisions may be appealed to the Administrative Court within 15 days (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 17). According to the State Attorney's Office report for 2022, cited by the ODIHR, 413 decisions to prosecute were taken under this Act, 245 court decisions were issued and 228 sanctions were confirmed (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, p. 17, fn. 72). However, the State Attorney's Office publishes only aggregate data, while information on sanctions against specific persons is not accessible to the public without a specific request.

5. Implementation in practice: the 2024 and 2025 electoral cycles

The early parliamentary elections of 17 April 2024 offer the most recent test of how the system functions. According to the financial reports submitted to the State Electoral Commission, the HDZ-led coalition spent just over EUR 2.1 million and the SDP-led "Rijeke pravde" coalition about EUR 1.6 million, while no list in any electoral unit exceeded the ceiling of EUR 199,084. In total, 658 donors gave about EUR 790,000, while the state reimbursed the elected parties about EUR 2.7 million, or EUR 17,918 per seat (N1 Zagreb and Hina, 2024). The main data are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Declared campaign expenditure in the parliamentary elections of 17 April 2024 (main lists)

List or coalition	Expenditure (EUR)	Seats
HDZ-led coalition	about 2,100,000	61
Rijeke pravde (SDP-led coalition)	about 1,600,000	42
Most and partners	about 613,000	11
Domovinski pokret (DP)	about 553,000	14
Možemo!	about 495,000	10

Source: financial reports submitted to the State Electoral Commission, as reported by N1 Zagreb and Hina (2024); authors' elaboration.

These figures show two things. First, formal reporting works and the data are public a few weeks after the elections, which is a significant achievement compared with many countries in

the region (Transparency International, 2023). Second, private donations make up only a small share of financing, while the overwhelming share comes from accumulated public funding and reimbursement, which confirms the public character of the Croatian model. Some lists ended the campaign with a deficit, which raises the question of how the difference was covered and brings back the importance of regulating loans. The ODIHR, in its final report on these elections, assessed that the legal framework had not been amended since the previous elections and that oversight was significantly limited by the fact that the State Electoral Commission had less than 30 days to review the final reports, with a team of only six members. The report also stressed that third-party campaigning remained unregulated, allowing hidden transactions and the circumvention of ceilings, and that online political advertising was not regulated by national law (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, pp. 13, 16-17). The European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report noted that, according to the State Audit Office, there had been no substantial violations of the rules on party financing, but at the same time that most of the audited parties had not fully complied with the law. The audit covered 31 of 47 parties and 3 of 5 independent representatives, while the most significant irregularities concerned financial statements and accounting. The State Electoral Commission decided in 37 cases on the temporary suspension of payments and took 33 decisions on the loss of the right to financing, because 25 individuals and 3 parties had not submitted their annual reports for 2023 (European Commission, 2025, p. 11). The BTI 2026 likewise assessed that the framework is generally adequate, but that the transparency of reports remains deficient, especially in local elections and with regard to online advertising (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026).

The local elections of May 2025 brought the problem of scale to the fore. Thousands of entities took part in them, with independent councillors alone numbering about 1,300. On 11 March 2025, the State Electoral Commission asked the ODIHR for an assessment of its proposals to amend the Act, including extending the deadline for the final oversight report, revising the donation and spending ceilings, simplifying six-monthly reporting and introducing more flexible sanctions. In its opinion of 11 June 2026, the ODIHR assessed these proposals as generally consistent with the purpose of oversight, but noted that they did not address its previous recommendations on third parties, loans and social media advertising (OSCE/ODIHR, 2026, paras. 1, 19, 24, 28, 37, 48).

6. Main results of the normative and empirical analysis

Croatia has a legal framework that is formally comprehensive and harmonised with Recommendation Rec(2003)4: a single act for regular, campaign and referendum financing, predictable public funding, donation and spending ceilings, a ban on anonymous and foreign donations, pre- and post-election reporting and online publication.

The Croatian model is dominated by public funding. This facilitates control, but favours parliamentary parties, because regular annual financing is granted only to those that have won a seat. Recent literature suggests that this model may reduce the competitiveness of new parties (Linek and Škvrňák, 2025).

The financial ceilings have remained nominally the same since 2019 and were only mechanically converted with the introduction of the euro. Inflation in recent years has made them less realistic, especially at local level, where the State Electoral Commission itself found frequent breaches in 2025 (OSCE/ODIHR, 2026, para. 28). There are normative gaps in the most dynamic areas of political finance. Loans have no ceilings and are not disclosed, third-party campaigning is not regulated and online political advertising has no national rules, even though Regulation (EU) 2024/900 has applied since October 2025. Donations from legal persons holding contracts with the public administration are permitted, which creates a risk of undue influence and of clientelist ties, which the BTI 2026 identifies as widespread in public

procurement (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). Oversight capacity is insufficient: the review period of about 30 days, the small team of the State Electoral Commission and the overlap of its mandate with that of the State Audit Office limit oversight to a largely formal check. Sanctions are relatively low, are not sufficiently graduated and are not published on an individual basis, which reduces their deterrent effect and transparency towards the public.
Overall, the findings confirm the hypothesis of the paper: the main problem in Croatia is not the absence of rules, but their adaptation to economic and technological reality and the strength of the mechanisms that enforce them.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the paper proposes the following recommendations to the Croatian legislature and institutions:

- The amounts in the Act should be updated to rounded values in euro and automatic annual indexation of donation and spending ceilings should be introduced, linked to objective indicators such as inflation or the average wage, instead of periodic legislative amendments.
- Campaign loans should be regulated. Only licensed financial institutions should be permitted lenders, on market terms, with publication of the contract, and unpaid or forgiven loans should be treated as donations.
- Third-party campaigning should be regulated through registration with the State Electoral Commission, a dedicated bank account, reporting and spending ceilings, while exempting organisations that engage solely in advocacy on public issues.
- Donations from entities holding public procurement contracts should be prohibited or strictly limited, and the State Electoral Commission should cross-check donor lists against procurement databases.
- Regulation (EU) 2024/900 should be implemented in national legislation, granting the State Electoral Commission clear competences over online political advertising and requiring separate reporting of social media expenditure.
- The deadline for reviewing final reports should be extended to 120 to 180 days, the human and digital capacity of the Commission should be strengthened and a unified digital register of all political entities should be established.
- The mandates of the State Electoral Commission and the State Audit Office should be clearly separated, so as to avoid duplication of work and to concentrate resources on the highest-risk cases.
- A regime of graduated and proportionate sanctions should be introduced and all final financial sanctions should be published in an online register.
- Consideration should be given to granting limited public funding also to extra-parliamentary parties that pass a low vote threshold, in order to mitigate the cartelisation effect and to foster political pluralism.

8. Conclusions

The paper showed that the Republic of Croatia has built a system of political finance which, at the normative level, meets most European standards. Predictable public funding, the ban on anonymous and foreign donations, donation and spending ceilings and the online publication of reports are achievements that can serve as a model for the countries of the Western Balkans. However, the effectiveness of this system is being weakened by three trends. The first is the ageing of the financial ceilings, which no longer reflect economic reality after the introduction of the euro and the inflationary wave. The second is the shift of political finance towards

channels the Act does not cover, such as loans, third parties and advertising on digital platforms. The third is the mismatch between the large volume of reports, particularly in local elections, and the limited capacity and deadlines of the oversight bodies.

The fact that the State Electoral Commission itself has initiated the process of revising the Act and has requested the ODIHR's assessment shows that there is institutional will for reform. Its success will depend on the readiness of the legislature to go beyond technical amendments and to address the politically more sensitive issues as well, such as loans, donors with public contracts and third parties. Future research could focus on quantitative analysis of the financial reports from the 2025 local elections and on the effects of implementing Regulation (EU) 2024/900 in future campaigns in Croatia and in the region.

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