



## **Weekly Briefing**


**Croatia external relations briefing:  
The Arrest of Eight Croatian Citizens in Zambia:  
Background and Context of the Case**

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# **The Arrest of Eight Croatian Citizens in Zambia:**

## **Background and Context of the Case**

### **Summary**

*This article will present the case that stole the spotlight of the Croatian media in the last two months, especially when it comes to foreign policy. In December 2022, eight Croatian citizens were arrested in Zambia in their attempt to adopt children from the Democratic Republic of Congo and were suspected of child trafficking and document falsification. The case continued in January and February of 2023 with new information circulating the media. At one point, the group was set to return to Croatia but was rearrested in what was revealed to be the work of the former Croatian member of Parliament Ivan Pernar who filed a complaint to Zambian authorities against eight Croats.*

### **Introduction**

Eight Croatian citizens were arrested by Zambian authorities on suspicion of child trafficking and falsification of documents after they attempted to adopt four children from the Democratic Republic of Congo. When someone reads this statement, it could easily be interpreted almost as an unreal scenario; however, the case that happened in mid-December 2022 and prolonged to February 2023 still causes headaches to Croatian authorities and diplomats. In January, the four couples paid the bail to be released from custody, while in February the court in Ndola, the third largest Zambian city, dismissed the indictment against the Croats and ordered them to leave the country within 48 hours. Just as they passed the control at the airport and were set to fly back to Croatia, the four couples were arrested again with the same charges as the first time. The reason for this was an anonymous complaint against them raised by a Croatian citizen who later turned out to be a former member of the Croatian Parliament Ivan Pernar who confessed this at the press conference in Zagreb. As for the children who were supposed to be adopted, Croatian Foreign Affairs Minister Goran Grlić-Radman said that the domestic authorities do not have information about their whereabouts.

## **The Arrest of Eight Croatian Citizens**

After the group was arrested for the first time back on December 9, 2022, the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, led by Minister Grlić-Radman, underlined that everything has to be done to ensure the humane treatment of the Croatian citizens by the Zambian authorities. The official of the Croatian Embassy in the Republic of South Africa, which covers 17 other African countries, including Zambia, paid a visit to the arrested group but was unable to visit the children regardless of the fact that they have the Croatian documents<sup>1</sup>. At the hearing, all suspects pleaded not guilty, with their assigned defense counsel filing a request to the court to let them defend on bail, which faced the reluctance of the state prosecutor who was suspicious fearing that the group might leave the country if they were allowed to do so. However, the court decided that they would have to pay 20.000 Zambian kwacha per person (somewhere around 1.100 US dollars), regulate their temporary stay in the country and submit all of their traveling documents, while continuously reporting to the local police if they want to be set free from the custody<sup>2</sup>. Eventually, the group was released in January after more than a month in prison, with the next hearing being set for the upcoming weeks. In February, the court in Ndola dismissed the indictment and put on a timeframe for the suspects to leave the county, which was considered a satisfactory ending, but just as they were boarding the plane to fly back to Croatia, the police arrested them again.

## **The Issue of Children's Documents**

Vinko Ljubičić, a person in charge of the Directorate for Consular Affairs within the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, said: “What we know so far is that their passports were returned, and they passed control at the airport and were about to board. Then the migration officer appeared and told them that she could not let them go. They are being kept there. What happens next, we don't know”<sup>3</sup>. This situation not only escalated headlines in the Croatian media but caused confusion among the country's diplomats and officials as well since no one was sure what exactly happened, other than that the same charges against the group were

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<sup>1</sup> Novilist.hr. 2023. VIDEO Osmero Hrvata izlazi iz zatvora u Zambiji: Moći će se braniti sa slobode, ali ne smiju napuštati zemlju [https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/osmero-hrvata-izlazi-iz-zatvora-u-zambiji-moci-ce-se-braniti-sa-slobode-ali-ne-smiju-napustati-zemlju/?meta\\_refresh=true](https://www.novilist.hr/novosti/osmero-hrvata-izlazi-iz-zatvora-u-zambiji-moci-ce-se-braniti-sa-slobode-ali-ne-smiju-napustati-zemlju/?meta_refresh=true).

<sup>2</sup> Nacional.hr. 2023. Hrvati uhićeni u Zambiji platili jamčevinu. Za izlazak na slobodu moraju ispuniti sve postavljene uvjete <https://www.nacional.hr/usprkos-jamcevini-i-ljudima-koji-za-njih-jamce-hrvati-u-zambiji-nisu-izasli-na-slobodu/>.

<sup>3</sup> Tesija, Vuk. 2023. Zambia Rearrests Four Croatian Couples in Child Adoption Case. Balkaninsight.com <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/02/07/zambia-rearrests-four-croatian-couples-in-child-adoption-case/>.

raised again. President Zoran Milanović commented that he does not consider the eight suspects to have any bad intention in the whole process and that he perceives them as people who genuinely wanted to adopt children, not to manipulate the system or falsify the documents<sup>4</sup>. Speaking of the documents, based on the decision of the Croatian courts in Zlatar and Varaždin, the children were granted Croatian citizenship; however, the decision was made on the accounts of documents provided by the Congolese courts even though, as reported by the Croatian media, the Democratic Republic of Congo refuses to permit adoption to foreigners. Therefore, from what is presented to the public, it is unclear whose authority should have been prioritized and whether the Congolese courts were allowed to make such a decision. The only information known is that the two Croatian courts recognized the children's documents and that Zambian authorities consider them falsified.

### **The Anonymous Tip to the Zambian Authorities**

In the meantime, the identities of rearrested Croats were disclosed to the public. Since there is no need or purpose for this article to mention their names, only their occupation will be mentioned. According to the media, all of them are considered to be socio-economically well-placed, with their profile including a guitar player, a Constitutional Court employee, a veterinary doctor, a business owner, a movie director, an electrical engineer, and a professor<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the identity of a person who filed a complaint to Zambian authorities against eight Croats was also revealed. It was Ivan Pernar, a former member of the Croatian Parliament, who admitted that he sent information to the Zambian police, while on one occasion he posted a screenshot of an e-mail he sent in which he implied that one of the suspects is transgender; thus, unable to adopt a child from the DR Congo. This raised the attention of the Croatian Ombudswoman who reacted by saying that information like this only puts the lives of suspected Croats in danger due to the position of transgender people in Zambia<sup>6</sup>. After the group was placed into custody for the second time, President Milanović commented that the European Union, specifically the two most powerful member states, France and Germany, did not provide

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<sup>4</sup> Večernji.hr. 2023. Milanović o uhićenim Hrvatima: Žao mi je ljudi, mislim da nisu nikakvi zlikovci i razbojnici <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/milanovic-o-uhicenim-hrvatima-zao-mi-je-ljudi-mislim-da-nisu-nikakvi-zlikovci-i-razbojnici-1648797>.

<sup>5</sup> Večernji.hr. 2023. Tko su Hrvati uhićeni u Zambiji? Među njima su gitarist, elektromehaničar, profesorica... <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/tko-su-hrvati-uhiceni-u-zambiji-medu-njima-su-gitarist-elektromehanicar-profesorica-1648816>.

<sup>6</sup> Index.hr. 2023. Pernar se hvali da je prijavio Hrvate u Zambiji. Odvjetnica: Za to mora odgovarati <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/pernar-se-hvali-da-je-prijavio-hrvate-u-zambiji-odvjetnica-za-to-mora-odgovarati/2437649.aspx>.

any diplomatic help to Croatia, while Croatia, on its own, can hardly do anything at this moment for its citizens. This statement goes in line with what was previously commented by the President, especially with regard to the influence and reputation that Croatia has, or better to say, does not have in its foreign affairs.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, the news about the arrested Croatian citizens in Zambia comes on a weekly basis; however, it is difficult to gain better insight into the case since those are only basic information about their current status. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, of course, says that diplomacy is at its highest level, but this is something that has to be said in order to ensure the families of eight Croatian citizens that the state is doing everything to bring them home. Therefore, we will still have to wait what will be the next decision of Zambian courts or what information will be leaked by Ivan Pernar, with both scenarios being quite discouraging for those who were supposed to help arrested citizens.