



ASTRA Network statement on rising threats to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe

We, the undersigned organizations, raise our voices in joint concern over the current developments affecting women and girls' human rights in the Central and Eastern European region and Central Asia.

ASTRA Central and Eastern European Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, consisting of organisations from Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Balkans and Caucasus countries, raises concern about the status of reproductive rights in the region and the rise of anti-choice rhetoric and practice, which pose a serious threat to the lives and wellbeing of women and girls.

For the past few years, ASTRA has been one of the few voices warning about conservative and anti-women efforts in the region. Women's reproductive and sexual rights are no longer in crisis; they are now questioned and openly under attack almost everywhere in the region.

The status of women's rights in the region has been depreciating over the past few years, reaching its peak in 2016 when conservative and anti-women forces gained power and influence in several countries of the region. The experiences of women are interlinked with the right wing turn in politics and rising threat to democracy and rule of law. The Central and Eastern European countries will negatively influence international progress on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The struggle to implement sexual and reproductive health and rights in the CEE & CA region is different from the one in Western Europe, where the right to abortion was a win of the feminist movement and human rights activists. In Central and Eastern Europe, with a complex history of communism and rising democracies, women have been granted access to abortion for decades. Poland is the only country in the region where the law on abortion had been tightened after the fall of communism. The 23-year-old struggle gained momentum in 2016, when the whole world witnessed well organized attempts to restrict women's rights in Poland, but also the mass protests and rejuvenation of Polish women's movement. Currently, the Government plans a nationwide campaign to promote "pro-life" values. In addition, it controls national media, violates the constitutional order and denies sufficient protection against discrimination in all areas.

The rise of nationalism and the influence of Churches on politicians and governments are the main reasons behind the worsening situation of women's reproductive rights in our region. Conservative governments go hand in hand with neo-conservative rhetoric and pronatalist solutions in health sectors. Women's bodies have become a symbol of national heritage and issue of national dispute in the context of religious and medical ethics, not that of human rights and bodily autonomy.

Of specific concern is the recent legislative amendment to the law on abortion in Armenia. The country has the second highest rate in abortion based on sex-selection in the world. The new provision introduces mandatory counseling and a three-day waiting period for women seeking abortions. This makes it more challenging for women, especially those from marginalized communities, to access their rights to safe and legal abortion care. Instead of addressing the main causes of this phenomenon, namely harmful traditional norms that favor boys over girls, the State limits women's reproductive freedoms without any consultations with experts or civil society.

Similarly, worrisome news come from other countries of the region such as Croatia, where the Church and State go also hand in hand on women's reproductive rights or Macedonia where the Government introduced additional barriers in access to abortion and is running an anti-choice campaign in the media. Romania, the Russian Federation and Hungary all experience a conservative turn in the reproductive rights and health sector, where the pressure and activity of anti-choice groups is constantly on the offensive. For instance, Romania boasts the largest number of churches in the Orthodox world with powerful influence on politicians.

Another challenge NGOs in the region are facing is a worsening funding situation. Most funding sources within the region do not support issues concerning women's sexual and reproductive rights. Moreover, NGOs are often blamed for destroying the so called traditional values and undermining the family. In the Russian Federation NGOs are often marked as "foreign agents", in Armenia and Poland civil society receiving funds from abroad are also starting to receive criticism from the governmental sector together with being blamed for "destroying the traditional and family values". Such environment makes it even harder for NGOs to gain financial support, which is critical for organizations to carry out work at grassroots level. Funds from the most influential institutions have been relocated to other regions and to big international organizations.

ASTRA calls on the international community to mobilize and stay united at a time when women's rights can no longer be taken for granted. As a community, we must strive to create a strong Europe that affirms bodily autonomy and grants women the right to make their own informed choices.

ASTRA Network Members: Albania - Albanian Family Planning Association; Armenia - Society Without Violence; Armenia - Women's Resource Center; Armenia - Women's Rights Center; Azerbaijan - Center "Women and Modern World"; Belarus - Women's Independent Democratic Movement of Belarus; Bulgaria - Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association; Bulgaria - Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation; Bulgaria - Gender Education, Research and Technologies; Bulgaria - Demetra Association; Bulgaria - Gender Alternatives Foundation; Bosnia and Herzegovina - SarajevoOpenCenter; Croatia - B.a.b.e.; Croatia - CESI; Croatia - Women's Room; Georgia - HERA XXI; Georgia - Real People, Real Vision; Georgia - Women's Center; Hungary - PATENT; Kazakhstan - The Legal Center for Women's Initiatives "Sana Sezim"; Lithuania - Family Planning and Sexual Health Association; Latvia - Latvia's Association for Family Planning And Sexual Health; Macedonia - Association for emancipation, solidarity and equality of women; Macedonia - H.E.R.A.; Macedonia - Shelter Center; Moldova - Family Planning Association; Moldova - Reproductive Health Training Center; Poland - Federation for Women and Family Planning; Romania - A.L.E.G.; Romania - AnA: Society for Feminist Analysis; Romania - Euroregional Center for Public Initiatives; Romania - The East European Institute of Reproductive Health; Russia - Novgorod Gender Center; Russia - Russian Association for Population and Development; Slovakia - Pro Choice; Tajikistan - Gender and Development; Ukraine - Women Health and Family Planning; Ukraine - Charitable SALUS Foundation; Uzbekistan - Future Generation

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