



CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

No 01 (198) 2021

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BURNING ISSUE

Poland introduces a nearly-total ban on abortion

On January 27, just before midnight, the abortion-banning “ruling” of Polish Constitutional Tribunal was published in Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland. As of this day, abortion is illegal in Poland, with exceptions of the pregnancy being a result of rape or incest, or a threat to the woman’s life or health.

Poland has already had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. The now-removed premise of Polish abortion law guaranteed the right to terminate a pregnancy if there were “severe and irreversible fetal defect or incurable illness that threatens the fetus’ life”. According to data

gathered by National Health Fund, around 98% of all abortions in the country were performed on the grounds of fetal malformations. Local reproductive rights NGO's, including Federation for Women and Family Planning, are now regrouping and planning new strategies, while protests are taking over the country.

As it was explained in [previous entry](#), the "ruling" violates very many provisions of Polish law and international treaties Poland is a party to. In particular, it fails to take into account the need to protect the inherent dignity of women and it violates the prohibition of cruel treatment and torture, the right to the protection of private life and the right to health. It is contrary to the Polish Constitution (in particular its Articles 30, 40, 47, 68 and the protection that these standards should provide to women) and to the obligations arising from the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or punishment of 10 December 1984, the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 19 December 1966 and the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 4 November 1950. Poland is a party to the above-mentioned conventions and it is unacceptable to lower the standards of human rights protection expressed therein through the national rules conflicting with them.

The "ruling" of the Constitutional Tribunal was first issued on October 22, 2020 and was immediately met with [the biggest protests](#) in history of democratic Poland.

After the ruling, a [collective complaint](#) was lodged by Polish women to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasburg.

Source: [Federation for Women and Family Planning](#)

REGIONAL UPDATES

"Is Croatia going the way of Poland on reproductive rights?" by Siniša Bogdanić, Davor Batisweiler

(...) A growing number of Croatian women are now traveling to neighboring Slovenia to have abortions. Leftist-liberal activists are in no doubt that the powerful Catholic Church and the ruling HDZ are to blame for this. Having an abortion is increasingly stigmatized in Croatia, Kovacevic says, while women's freedom to take decisions about their own bodies is being called into question more and more.

Kovacevic says that religious instruction is given higher priority than sex education in Croatia. She has harsh words for what is happening in her country: "Women are experiencing a kind of gynecological violence." According to her, when women go to their local hospital and say they want an abortion, they are turned away and often have to endure insults and moral lectures to boot.

These claims are borne out by the results of a study in the hands of the Croatian commissioner for gender equality, Visnja Ljubicic. The research was carried out in 30 state-run hospitals and clinics in which abortions should be possible — in theory, at least.

"In 2014, 54% of the medical personnel made use of their right to refuse, and in 2018, 59%. In Slovenia, by comparison, only 3% of medical practitioners exercise the right," Ljubicic says. (...)

Source: [Deutsche Welle](#)

Russian Orthodox Church changes stance on abortion

In December 2020, Russian Orthodox Church revealed a change in the institution's stance on abortion.

Vladimir Legoyda, main spokesperson for Russian Orthodox Church, [commented](#) on the topic of abortion in a TV interview in RTVI, a New York-based Russian-language channel aimed at expats. According to Legodya, the institution insists on changing the status of abortion in Russian health insurance system:

"We are taking a softer and more flexible position in this case: we demand [abortion] be withdrawn from the compulsory health insurance fund," he said. The Compulsory Medical Insurance Fund is a public program of providing free medical care country-wide.

Solution proposed by the Church would still impact multiple Russians, as the need to pay for the procedure would make it inaccessible for a large number of patients in need of the procedure.

Russian Orthodox Church has been known for supporting a blanket ban on abortion in the country, with Patriarch Kiril, head of the Church, openly stating "We must first of all remove the topic of abortion to the extent that it exists" [back in 2019](#).

Source: [ASTRA Network](#)

Romanian Constitutional Court brings back gender studies

The Constitutional Court of Romania ruled that banning gender studies in Romanian educational system was unconstitutional and therefore annulled the law.

The ban was originally proposed by a centre-right Popular Movement Party and adopted last June. An amendment to National Education Law, the ban claimed gender to be an ideological invention and banned “theories and opinion on gender where it is a separate concept from biological sex”. For many, including Romanian members of ASTRA Network, the amendment was an upfront attack on comprehensive sexuality education and feminist studies.

As Daniela Draghici, ASTRA Network’s board member and Romanian activist, [wrote](#) for us in June: *Romanian academics, students and human rights groups have condemned a new law banning gender identity studies in schools and universities and accused lawmakers of wanting to send the country’s education “back to the Middle Ages”. Several higher education institutions have harshly condemned the legislation, including the University of Bucharest, saying that “it contradicts fundamental rights guaranteed by the Romania Constitution and international conventions of which Romania is a party to”.*

Source: [ASTRA Network](#)

FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

Polish “Abortion Without Compromise” legislative initiative

On October 22, 2020, the illegitimate Polish Constitutional Court ruled that access to abortion due to “high probability of severe and irreversible foetal disability or incurable disease threatening its life” is unconstitutional. Fierce protests have been held incessantly following the decision of the CT.

On 27 January 2021, the text of the illegal Constitutional Court statement was published in the Journal of Laws which means its formal entry into force of the decision. The publication sparked protests across the entire Poland.

In response to this cruelty of the politicians backed by the Catholic Church and religious fundamentalists, the representatives of Polish feminist organisations and MPs from Left wing party (Lewica) created the Legislative Committee and on 3 February 2021 organised the press conference where they presented the draft bill called Legal Abortion Without Compromise. Further they will

formally register the Committee and start the process of collection of 100,000 signatures for this civic draft bill to be tabled at the Polish Parliament for debate.

The conference was attended by representatives of women's organizations and movements that are part of the Committee, including Kamila Ferenc from the Federation for Women and Family Planning and Aleksandra Magryta from the Great Coalition for Equality and Choice, together with Polish Women's Strike – Marta Lempart and Bożena Przyłuska, Abortion Dream Team – Karolina Więckiewicz and Natalia Broniarczyk, Lodz Girls for Girls – Aleksandra Knapik-Gauza, , Women's Rights Center – Urszula Nowakowska and deputies of the Left party (Lewica): Katarzyna Kotula, Wanda Nowicka, Marcelina Zawisza, Magdalena Biejat, Joanna Senyszyn, Monika Falej, Katarzyna Ueberhan, Katarzyna Kretkowska.

The main thesis of the draft bill Legal Abortion Without Compromise include:

- abortion available under the public health scheme until week 12th week without asking the patient for the reason;
- abortion available under the public health scheme after the 12th week in the case of foetal defects or when pregnancy is a result of a criminal act;
- strict deadlines as regards providing abortion services and sanctions on doctors for abusing of the refusal of care on the ground of conscience;
- duty for the directors of hospitals to hire subcontractors in the event of refusal of care on the grounds of conscience by all doctors working in the facility;
- decriminalization of abortion: no criminal penalties for doctors and persons assisting in abortions in violation of the provisions of the restrictive anti-abortion act;
- simplification and acceleration of the "objection procedure" serving to challenge refusal of service/doctor's opinion (24 hours deadline for reply);
- prenatal testing programme will cover specialist tests such as PAPP-A and β hCG for all patients which are performed in the 1st trimester of pregnancy to detect potential illness of the foetus.

Please follow the developments of the Committee for Legal Abortion Without Compromise [here](#) and support the process of collecting of signatures. The Committee's web page will be launched soon where the text of the bill will be presented and the information on the modalities of signing the bill will be included.

Source: [Federation for Women and Family Planning](#)

Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Macedonia under attack from anti-gender movement

In January 2021, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia has presented the [new concept](#) of primary education reforms which recognizes the comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as an optional subject for students aged 13-14.

HERA, as a member association of IPPF, has been working for more than 10 years on introducing the comprehensive sexuality education in the formal system. Most of our past advocacy initiatives were unsuccessful due to the conservative approach of the former Demo-Christian Government which thought that CSE was just an attempt to counter and undermine the traditional and family values of the society. For the past 2 months HERA and the National Bureau for Development of Education have been working jointly on training teachers to pilot CSE as an optional subject in several elementary schools, after the approval of the Government in [November 2019](#). The results of the pilot will provide further evidence-based argumentation for creation of school curricula as an optional subject in the 9th grade. The new concept of reforms also recognizes that other age-appropriate topics of CSE will be integrated in the entire educational process for elementary school students, i.e. through humanistic subjects and in science. The pilot CSE will be launched with the start of new school year, September 2021.

For several weeks now HERA has been witnessing distribution of fake news and disinformation regarding CSE pilot program content, particularly on social media. HERA has been under constant attack particularly in the last few days from an anti-gender organization called [From Us to Us](#) and some far-right political parties. By using false images and information from other countries textbooks, they are condemning HERA as a promotor of gender transformative ideology and homosexual propaganda aiming at to sexualizing children and gaining profit from abortion. On 5 February 2021, HERA has issued a [press statement](#) asking for public apology and for removal of all HERA and CSE related lies and disinformation. Since we don't expect from the CSE opposition organization to take our demands seriously, HERA will undertake a legal action for public defamation to protect its image and reputation. HERA will also intensify the social media campaigning on the benefits of CSE over the next several months to reduce the damage made by the orchestrated distribution of false information so far and to prevent any social panic and fear among the public. Particularly our target will be the parents who don't have enough information about the importance of CSE for the emotional and physical development of the young people.

Source: [H.E.R.A.](#)

Rising opposition towards sexuality education in Romanian schools

Parents are opposing to sexuality education classes conducted in schools in Romania. As Daniela Draghici, Romanian activists and ASTRA Network's Advisory Board member, tells us, *they are mostly motivated by conservative forces and the Church*. Specialised NGO's are reportedly struggling to raise funding for social campaigns, the last of which was organised in 2015. Local activists managed to get enough funding to renew their efforts, albeit with much more difficulty in the times of COVID-19 lockdowns. The only entry point for activists is ASTRA Network's member organisation, [SEXUL vs BARZA](#) (SEX vs The STORK). What worries Draghici is also *no chance to improve the almost 0-level contraception situation at the few remaining family planning clinics*.

The national family planning program was first introduced in Romania in 1994. A national network of 142 clinics was set up in all counties, with general practice physicians trained in counseling and dispensing contraceptives. However, out of the 153 family planning clinic that existed in 2014, 36 closed down in the past 6 years and most of the others have not had any contraceptives to offer in the last 4 years. As Draghici puts it: *free contraceptives (sometimes in more forms than only condoms) can still be found at only 2 clinics in the country, that have managed locally, after the contraception acquisition mechanism at the Ministry of Health started failing. The issue has not been resolved due to lack of interest on behalf of relevant decision-makers, particularly those at the National Health Insurance House*.

The clinics are part of the governmental health system. A consultation is free of charge, which is extremely important for adolescents older than 15 and adults from all social classes, especially vulnerable populations. The clinics can provide to any person or couple – at least on paper – free counselling to choose the most suitable contraceptive method and plan a future pregnancy. Likewise, it is recommended that any person who wishes to start their sexual life should first visit a family planning clinic to learn what the best method of contraception is and what the risks are with STIs.

Source: Daniela Draghici/[ASTRA Network](#)

Armenian situation regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights during COVID-19 pandemic

During the period of March 20 to May 20, Women's Resource Center has conducted on-line interviews with 62 gynecologists and 14 women who have seek sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services during lockdown to discover the situation regarding sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) during Covid-19 pandemic in Armenia. The monitoring revealed that the Ministry of Health had made a decision for all healthcare facilities to postpone all non-essential surgeries,

but no other regulation on SRHR issues were made for the period of state of emergency. The abortion services were provided by many doctors, although many women had lack of access to transport to reach abortion services, moreover, the medical abortion was not widely used by the doctors, so the women have lack of access to those as well. Maternity hospitals operated normally and the contraceptive methods were available in most of the monitored pharmacies. Based on the results of the monitoring of healthcare system, a follow-up online survey or a formative assessment was conducted among women during June-August, 2020. You can get acquainted with the monitoring data in detail by visiting the following link: <https://womenofarmenia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COVID-19-survey-report.pdf>

Source: [Women's Resource Center](#)

Training for the implementation of recently approved National Safe Abortion Standards carried out in Moldova

At the beginning of December 2020, a training for primary care providers and gynecologists working in public institutions, Youth-Friendly Health Centers, and Reproductive Health Centers was organized by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Social Protection (MoHLSP) in partnership with the Reproductive Health Training Center (RHTC). On December 4, the training was carried out for Romanian-speaking participants and on December 9, for Russian-speaking participants.

The course was facilitated by RHTC team members involved in the revision of the [National Safe Abortion Standards](#) in Moldova, which were approved by the MoHLSP via [Order No. 766](#) on August 18, 2020.

Dr. Rodica Comendant, RHTC Director, began the course by presenting on the steps taken by the working group in aligning the Standards with the most recent World Health Organization (OMS) guidelines, national trends in abortion incidence and quality in Moldova, and general guidelines for providing abortion care throughout the course of pregnancy, as highlighted in chapter 1.

Then, Dr. Stelian Hodorogea, Associate Professor at the State University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Nicolae Testemițanu", led a discussion about the following two chapters of the updated Standards, with chapter 2 focusing on pre-abortion examination, consultation, and informed consent and chapter 3 detailing surgical abortion provision measures, including the official ban of dilation and curettage.

Next, Dr. Rodica Comendant covered the new medical abortion guidelines (chapter 4), including permission to offer medical abortion (MA) up to 12 weeks of pregnancy (previously limited to 9

weeks), the possibility to provide MA via telemedicine, and remote follow-up 7-14 days after administration of mifepristone.

Lastly, Dr. Irina Sagaidac, Assistant Professor at the State University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Nicolae Testemițanu”, provided a detailed overview of the importance of contraception following abortion, routine provision guidelines for pre- and post-abortion contraceptive counseling, and the various methods of contraception from which beneficiaries can choose.

Overall, 109 medical providers participated in the trainings, thus becoming familiarized with modifications and additions included in the new National Safe Abortion Standards. In addition, 1500 copies of the Standards have been distributed to primary care providers and gynecologists from across the country.

The revision of the National Safe Abortion Standards in Moldova and printing and distribution thereof has been supported by the Safe Abortion Action Fund as part of the project [“Bringing the WHO recommendations on safe abortion closer to women, in countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, by supporting the development of national clinical guidelines and protocols on unwanted pregnancy.”](#)

Source: [Reproductive Health Training Center](#)

RESOURCES

IPAS and CRR launch a new report: Improving Access to Abortion in Crisis Settings

From the introduction: *Abortion is regulated by the criminal law in most countries, even where abortion laws are liberal. It’s important for organizations and agencies looking into providing abortion care to not only understand local abortion laws, but also how the law operates in a given setting. This tool is designed to help program planners and organizations to understand the potential impact of abortion regulation and help assess legal risk when providing or supporting access to abortion for people who are displaced by crisis, including conflict, natural disaster or other humanitarian contexts. The tool can be completed online or in-person and with program teams, field teams, program managers and other decision-makers. It can also be incorporated into other risk- and security assessment processes.*

Read the report [here](#).

New issue of “Analyze – Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies” published online

“Analyze – Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies” is an on-line, open access, peer-reviewed international journal edited by ASTRA Network’s member organisation, The Romanian Society for Feminist Analyses AnA . The journal aims to bring into the public arena new ideas and findings in the field of gender and feminist studies and to contribute to the gendering of the social, economic, cultural and political discourses and practices about today’s local, national, regional and international realities. The newest issue, published in December 2020, is titled “Playground for Mothers, Fathers, States and Ideologies” .

As Mihaela Michailov writes in this issue’s editorial:

The landscape of motherhood has gone through important social and political changes in recent years, due to relevant demographic changes, assisted reproductive technologies, work force migration, economical pressure and also profound impact of feminist thinking and practice.

In the last decades, maternity has continuously reshaped its social design, confronting on one hand with the challenges of emancipation and on the other hand with new capitalist frames of individualism and constrictive needs.

The current issue investigates the politics and intimate fields of motherhood, proposing intersectional perspectives that broaden the understanding of a whole range of representations, searching for new territories of reflection on maternity. The issue covers different aspects regarding maternity, related on economical implication of childcare to ethical dimensions and personal choices, thus covering a diversity of layers of identification.

Click here for [full PDF file](#).

UPCOMING EVENTS

Due to global epidemic of COVID-19, all upcoming events requiring physical interactions have been cancelled or indefinitely postponed. Other events are mostly organised online, usually as webinars.

“Ending Domestic Violence Finding a Long-Term Strategy for Protection and Prevention” – a webinar

An online event on domestic violence in United Kingdom will be hosted by Public Policy Exchange. Although deeply rooted in UK’s political and social contexts, the webinar may serve as a source of inspiration for women’s rights activists from other parts of the world. Program on PPE’s website includes:

- *Planning and implementing effective intervention strategies to identify and support victims early*
- *Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on levels of domestic abuse, and the extent to which this is considered in government action during the pandemic*
- *Examining ways to address the fundamental drivers of domestic violence*
- *Developing effective strategies for protecting and supporting survivors of domestic abuse, from both a national and regional perspective*

Register [online](#).

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 – Sarajevo Open Center; 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; BOCS Foundation; 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; Ponton Group of Sex Educators; Romania - A.L.E.G.; Romania – SEXUL vs BARZA/SEX vs THE STORK; 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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