



CEE Bulletin on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

No 01 (213) 2024

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BURNING ISSUE

Women are being restricted from accessing medical services in Georgia

According to the Order of the Minister of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of [Georgia №75/N](#) of 26th of October 2023 a woman's right to access high-quality safe medical abortion services is being violated.

New order hampers availability, accessibility and financial affordability of safe abortion services from women. Specifically:

1. Mandatory additional ultrasound service;
2. The introduction of mandatory consultation of a social worker and a psychologist

The following changes also affect the geographical availability, because all the medical institutions providing the service may not have the financial or human resources to employ a social worker and a psychologist. The mentioned circumstance will also be an additional hindering factor for women to receive the emergency health services they need on time;

3. In addition, the procedure for medical abortion was changed, in particular, according to the previous order, medical abortion was allowed up to 10 weeks based on the request of a pregnant woman, but with the new order, it was reduced to 7 gestational weeks at the primary level medical facilities.

4. The order also includes statement regarding professional responsibility for doctors in case of violation of the 5-day waiting period.

It should be noted that order imposed by the Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia is not supported either by evidence-based practices or by the recommendations of experts in the field.

Source: [HERA XXI](#)

REGIONAL UPDATES

Polish cabinet moves to restore prescription-free emergency contraception

Poland's cabinet on Wednesday approved a draft law to restore prescription-free emergency contraception, reversing a restriction introduced by the previous nationalist government in 2017 and delivering on a pledge of Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

According to the government, the 2017 legislation forcefully limited access to "morning after" pills, which became available over the counter in 2015 after a decision of the European Commission to authorize their prescription-free sale.

Poland's ruling coalition has vowed to undo some policies of the former Law and Justice (PiS) party government, including one of Europe's most restrictive abortion rules, to bring Poland back into line with European Union democratic standards.

"The topics at today's meeting included the finalization of works regarding the so-called day-after pill. The matter has been finalized, the draft will be sent to parliament," Tusk, a former European Council president, told a press briefing.

Tusk said the prescription-free emergency contraception would be available for women over 15 years of age, adding that he hoped the legislation would be backed in parliament and signed into law by the president.

Tusk added that his party, the Civic Coalition, is ready to submit to parliament "within hours" draft legislation legalizing abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy.

During its rule between 2015 and 2023 PiS, with backing from the powerful Polish Catholic Church, also ended state funding for in-vitro fertilization (IVF), while a 2020 ruling of the country's top court triggered a near total ban on pregnancy terminations and widespread protests.

Source: [Reuters](#)

Montenegro Activists Protest Femicide Verdict, Demand Reform to System

Human rights activists in Montenegro called for the government to hold a special thematic session to present critical issues in the current system for prevention and protection against violence, along with concrete proposals for its improvement.

Around a hundred civil activists gathered on Friday in front of the government building in Podgorica to protest against the Higher Court verdict in the femicide case in a protest organised by the NGO Women's Rights Centre.

The court on Monday sentenced Dalibor Nikolic to 12 years in prison after his pregnant wife, Zumrita Nerda, died on January 17, 2022 from his beating.

The head of the Women's Rights Centre, Maja Raicevic, said they were protesting because they had not received a response to earlier demands for the government to reform a system "that fails to protect victims".

"We demand that the government strengthen the authority of the previously established operational team for family violence as an independent mechanism to assess the performance of all relevant institutions involved in the system combating violence," Raicevic said.

"The goal is to ensure effective protection of victims, end impunity for officials who fail to fulfill their duties in cases of family violence and build trust in the work of state institutions."

Zumrita Nerda, a 27-year-old Roma, died five days after being badly beaten by her husband at their home in the port of Bar. The Higher State Prosecution accused Nikolic of beating his wife for

eight hours after an argument in front of their three minor children, stressing she received dozens of blows with fists and an improvised baseball bat.

Miranda Nerda told the gathered crowd that her sister, Zumrita, had suffered brutal violence for 11 years, and that a 12-year prison sentence was too lenient.

“Where is the justice here? Is this justice?” she asked, while the gathered activists expressed their disapproval with whistles.

Source: [Ivan Ivanovic/Balkan Insight](#)

What is Empowerment through Self-Defense (ESD)

Empowerment through Self-Defense is a violence prevention strategy for women/all genders in vulnerable situations. It is a toolbox of techniques, initially adopted by martial artists, that has been proven to effectively reduce the incidence of abuse. In ESD we work three aspects: mental, verbal and physical power. This class is experiential: we are teaching the mind and the body and the way to teach the body is by doing. Through the 5 principles of ESD - namely THINK, YELL, FIGHT, RUN, TELL - ESD Global Self-Defense instructors teach a set of skills that can be used to de-escalate violent situations and defend ourselves and others.

Daniela Draghici, Empowerment through Self Defense Level 2 & Lead instructor from Romania has conducted 23 workshops for 321 Ukrainian refugees in Romania, mostly women and children aged 5 to 71 during May through July 2023. This endeavor has been part of the project “Provision of integrated support to refugees from Ukraine to actively prevent and respond to all forms of gender-based violence”, implemented by Asociația ANAIS, with support from UNICEF Romania. The Ukrainian refugees wanted to know how to defend themselves in case of conflict or danger and were avid to master both soft and hard skills, particularly the strikes to the hand pad, which they also wanted to try as co-instructors. The interaction between mothers and their children, when partnering to exercise the various strikes, was so powerful. The feedback was extremely positive and encouraging for future sessions.

Such workshops, conducted in English / Romanian, are beneficial for teenagers and children, as well as for their mothers or grandmothers. They are really beneficial for anybody and any body, irrespective of height, weight, or previous physical training. They are not only about self-defense, but also about generating a spirit of self-reliance, becoming truly empowered, and definitely having fun.

Counting in the other workshops Daniela conducted for the Romanian Women's Lobby, Sensiblu Foundation, the East European Institute for Reproductive Health, the Coalition for Gender Equality, the European Center for Legal Education and Research, as well as for the National Agency for Equal Opportunities (ANES) & ASTRA Network the total to date is 35 workshops for more than 500 participants.

News flash: UNICEF Romania has extended its funding for the ESD workshops Daniela Draghici is holding on behalf of ANAIS Association for another 6 months.

Source: Daniela Draghici//ASTRA Network Board Member

FROM ASTRA MEMBERS

Universal Health Insurance in Armenia: A Shield or a New Challenge?

The Armenian government has initiated a comprehensive health insurance system with the goal of ensuring affordable healthcare for all citizens. The concept received approval in February 2023, with plans for a phased implementation. The testing phase, spanning from 2024 to 2026, will precede the full implementation of the universal health insurance system in 2027.

However, there are notable concerns regarding the clarity and inclusiveness of the proposed system. The draft law, currently under review at the Ministry of Health, introduces new concepts without sufficient communication with civil society and the general public. Notably, the published draft raises issues of inclusivity and sensitivity, particularly in its potential impact on vulnerable groups such as unemployed individuals, many of whom are women. The coverage appears to exclude this demographic, providing limited inclusion only under specific circumstances, such as caring for a child under the age of 2 or being insured by a family member.

Furthermore, the proposed flat annual payment for insurance raises concerns about exacerbating social inequities. This approach may disproportionately affect individuals with lower incomes, deepening disparities in access to healthcare services.

Additionally, the readiness of primary medical units (polyclinics) to handle the new system is a significant concern. The lack of renovations and potential risks associated with their capacity to support the reform during its initial stages are noteworthy issues that require attention.

Other critical points of contention include uncertainties about the services covered by the insurance, the composition of the Board of Trustees of the Foundation overseeing the system, and the protection of citizens' personal data.

Recognizing these challenges, the Women's Resource Center is collaborating with various civil society organizations to advocate for improved regulations and enhanced accessibility within the proposed health insurance system. Our efforts extend to the integration of accessible reproductive services into insurance packages, with a special emphasis on facilitating the distribution of free contraceptives for women. Addressing these concerns is crucial to ensuring a more transparent, inclusive, and effective implementation of the universal health insurance system in Armenia.

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

“Kneelers” for the first time in Rijeka

On Saturday 06.01. Initiative "Be Manly" gathered for the first time in Rijeka in front of the St. Vitus Cathedral to pray for men, abortions prevention, women's chastity, premarital chastity and simply pray for life.

At the same time, there were almost twice as many people that gathered at the same place who were against this backward phenomenon. What started as a gloomy rainy gathering quickly turned into a cheerful, energetic and loud absolute domination of the citizens of Rijeka over the public prayer for women's chastity. The gathering against kneelers was joined by the deputy mayor of Rijeka - Sandra Krpan - who clearly stated that the City of Rijeka is against this practice.

Rijeka has shown that she is not interested in the spiritual leadership of men on their knees.

[Video reportage in Croatian.](#)

Source: [PaRiter](#)

The first sex education manual for educators, social workers and psychologists in Romania

A manual dedicated to educators, social workers and psychologists in the child protection system in Romania has been launched by the SEXUL vs BARZA Association.

Adapted to the needs of beneficiaries and employees in the child protection system in our country, the kit is composed of two curricula:

1. "Sex education. Manual in support of educators, social workers and psychologists in the child protection system in Romania", which includes the most important notions of sex education for adolescents in the system;
2. "Why Sex Education. A guide to the Manual in support of educators, social workers and psychologists in the child protection system in Romania", which includes the most important notions for the training of educators, psychologists and social workers in the centres.

This sex education manual was produced within the framework of the pilot project "Prevention and resilience against sex trafficking through comprehensive sex education", funded by the German Embassy in Bucharest. The aim of this project is the development of resources to help educators and social workers to provide sex education to adolescents in their care who are in vulnerable situations.

Testing the sex education manual

In order to see if the manual answers the questions of vulnerable adolescents, it was tested in the Emergency Reception Centre and in family residential apartments in Buzău city, Romania.

Thus, in the last 5 months, the project team participated in 2 brainstorming sessions and 1 training session with the Buzău-based General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection employees, as well as 3 sex education workshops with teenagers. The two resulting curricula respond to the specificities and needs of the staff and beneficiaries, addressing topics of general interest such as anatomy, contraception and protection or sexually transmitted infections, but also topics particular to the risk situation in which the girls in the system find themselves, such as human trafficking or sexual exploitation.

"We are extraordinarily proud to broaden the educational offer of the SEXUL vs BARZA Association, from our online video materials for the general public, viewed over 105 million times, to the first sex education manual dedicated to professionals working with the most vulnerable children in Romania. In this way we want to contribute to their protection from exploitation and human trafficking, but also from unwanted pregnancies or unhealthy relationships," said Adriana Radu, President of SEXUL vs BARZA Association.

Moreover, the Association organized 4 advocacy meetings with representatives and employees of four General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection, who expressed their interest to continue the project started in Buzău and in their localities, reiterating the need for training in sex education for the staff of the system.

The need for such projects

Romania is the country in the European Union with the highest number of mothers under 14 in 2021. According to Eurostat, 414 girls under 14 gave birth in our country in 2021, almost as many as in all European countries combined. At the same time, our country accounts for 45% of births to mothers under 14.

On the other hand, Romania is among the seven countries in the European Union where sex education is not compulsory in schools, according to the Social Monitor. Even though studies show that countries where pupils receive sex education in schools have a much lower percentage of underage mothers and a higher rate of natural childbearing.

Sex education can help reduce the number of girls who drop out of school and the chance of a fair place in the labour market because of early pregnancy.

Last year alone, 687 girls under the age of 15 became mothers, according to the National Statistics Institute. In fact, between 15,000 and 17,000 teenagers aged 15 to 19 give birth in Romania every year. Lack of education is the main reason why Romanian minors end up having a child before they are ready.

Source: [SEX vs THE STORK](#) (SEXUL vs BARZA)

We reduce stress and increase safety for Ukrainians and beyond

The Association for Liberty and Gender Equality (A.L.E.G.) continues to support women, children and young people affected by the war in Ukraine, who are under temporary protection in Sibiu, Romania, as well as those still in Ukraine, through Empowerment through Self Defense (ESD) courses, which develop effective techniques to prevent violence in individual contexts, increasing feelings of safety. Being a combination of physical activities and risk analysis, the courses also help in reducing stress, anxiety, providing positive social interaction in the group of learners. The trainings are taught by Tetiana Kolot, a refugee from Odessa who has been working with A.L.E.G. since April 2022.

In May 2022, A.L.E.G. supported Tetiana Kolot to become certified as an ESD trainer through a course in Prague. Tatiana subsequently received a lot of support from the ESD community in Romania and Europe so that she could start working with children, adolescents and refugee women, and now has experience working with international groups.

The empowerment-based self-defense model includes physical as well as verbal self-defense techniques, skills for quick assessment of a situation, risk awareness and assertiveness practices. Activities include discussions on preventing harassment, bullying and other types of violence, as well as practising constructive reactions in borderline situations.

In 2023, Tetiana managed to hold classes for 580 people, including more than 450 children and teenagers (the children's classes were held last year at the Ukrainian School in the Gushterița district). Most of the participants were people from the Ukrainian community settled in Sibiu, but recently Tatiana has started to give courses for young Siberians as well. Tatiana has travelled to many cities in the country for the courses, but also to her hometown Odessa, where she worked with women involved in supporting the Ukrainian resistance (psychologists, firefighters, etc.).

As part of the A.L.E.G. team, Tatiana held ESD courses for members of the ASTRA network, together with Board member Daniela Draghici in 2022 and 2023 and they are hoping to continue during the next ASTRA Network annual meetings.

Source: [ALEG](#)

ASTRA's Board Member

Advisory Board member Daniela Draghici joined the collective project called "The Best of Europe for Women" undertaken by the volunteer-based French NGO [Choisir la cause des femmes](#), whose key members went on a European tour to meet with their militant counterparts from feminist associations. Their purpose was to carry out an investigation and put together a legislative package of the most satisfactory laws for women in the EU. They included their research in a book, which is meant to be the updated version of the "The Most Favored European Woman Clause", which was launched at a unique European feminist conference organized by [Choisir la cause des femmes](#), a feminist organization founded by Simone de Beauvoir and the anti-colonialist lawyer Gisèle Halimi in 1971.

The aim of the conference was to draw up a European citizens' initiative for the adoption, at European level, of a set of laws most favorable to the emancipation of women, based on the best laws existing in the EU member states, that have demonstrated their effectiveness.

In her capacity as ASTRA Network advisory board member Daniela participated in theme-based workshops, such as:

- Are sexual and reproductive rights in Europe at risk?

- How shall we fight together against patriarchal violence?
- How do women achieve economic independence in Europe?
- How do women gain access to political power in Europe?
- How to have a family as a feminist in Europe?

The conference concluded with the [Nantes Declaration](#): a call for the Best of Europe for Women that is meant to be extended to all European countries before a year of European elections. The next European Parliament will have to fight for women's rights against the extreme right! It is a matter of urgency!

Video in French: [\(8\) Declaration of Nantes December 2023 - YouTube](#)

Source: Daniela Draghici//ASTRA Network Board Member

RESOURCES

“Between a rock and a hard place – the NGOization of feminism and resistance to anti-gender politics” – new issue of the AnaLize. Journal of gender and feminist studies

From the editorial:

Today, feminist resistance to external threats seems at least two-folded – facing the anti-gender mobilizations, whose influence increased during the last decade, and the neoliberal technologies of domination – at the basis of the NGOization process, such as governmental precarization and neoliberal bureaucratization deployed through the expansion of market norms to all spheres of the society, including civil society (Ana 2024). More than a backlash against gender advancements, anti-gender politics seem to be part of the wider and profound process of political, social and cultural reconfiguration of societies, in which gender backsliding represents a symbolic consequence – one amongst others (Paternotte 2020). (...)

This special issue aimed to understand the challenges posed by these recent transformations of feminist movements and to explore the possibilities of broader solidarities and coalitions as well as the tensions that hinder the advance of gender equality. Is the NGOization paradigm still helpful to understand recent transformations of feminist movements and how? How does the politicization of gender and sexuality struggles and the remobilization of women at mass scale challenge previous understandings of feminist movements as being NGOized? In what ways does NGOization impact feminist activism today?

Read the issue [online](#).

UPCOMING EVENTS

14th February - Launch of the Contraception Atlas Europe 2024

From the event website:

On the occasion of Valentine's Day 2024, EPF is delighted to invite you to the **launch of the 7th edition of the EPF Contraception Policy Atlas Europe**. The event is hosted by the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights and **MEP Karen Melchior (Renew Europe, Denmark)**.

About the event:

Access to **contraception should be a key concern of governments** in **empowering citizens** to plan their families and lives. Yet the Contraception Policy Atlas – **a map that scores 46 countries throughout geographical Europe on policies in access to supplies, counselling, and online information - continues to reveal a very uneven picture across Europe.**

Join our event to see the developments in contraception policies that have taken place in the past year, especially:

- Learn how your **national government scores** in terms of access to supplies, counselling, and online information and see how this score can be improved.
- Meet and **interact with Members of the European Parliament, civil society advocates, and UN agencies** working to advance access to contraception in Europe.
- Enjoy breakfast and taste our ***delicious contraception-themed chocolates!***

[Register here](#) before the 1st of February and join us at the European Parliament or follow the event online:

- **Room: PHS 7C50**
- **Date: 14h February 2024**
- **Time: 11:00 - 13:00**

Source: [European Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights](#)

ASTRA Network Members: Albania - Albanian Center for Population Development; 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 – PaRiter; Croatia - Women's Room; Georgia – HERA XXI; Georgia – Real People, Real Vision; Georgia - Women's Center; Hungary – PATENT; BOCS Foundation; Emma Közhasznú Egyesület; Kazakhstan - The Legal Center for Women's Initiatives "Sana Sezim"; Latvia - Association for Family Planning And Sexual Health "Papardes Zieds"; Lithuania - Family Planning and Sexual Health Association; Moldova – Family Planning Association; Moldova - Reproductive Health Training Center; North Macedonia - Association for emancipation, solidarity and equality of women; North Macedonia – H.E.R.A.; North Macedonia – Shelter Center; Poland - Federation for Women and Family Planning; Ponton Group of Sex Educators; Romania - A.L.E.G.; Romania – AnA – Society for Feminist Analyses; Romania - Euroregional Center for Public Initiatives; Romania - The East European Institute of Reproductive Health; Romania – SEXUL vs BARZA/SEX vs THE STORK; Russia - Novogorod Gender Center; Russia – Russian Association for Population and Development; Slovakia – Moznost Volby; Tajikistan – Gender and Development; Ukraine - Women Health and Family Planning; Ukraine - SALUS Charitable Foundation; Uzbekistan - Future Generation

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