

## **Working for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe**

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**ABSTRACT** *At the Association For Women's Right's in Development (AWID) Forum, ASTRA – the Central and Eastern European (CEE) Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights together with ASTRA Youth – looked at how to respond to the rise in religious fundamentalism in CEE. Both established and young activists – Sanja Cesar from Croatia, Nadiya Bedrychuk from Ukraine, Irene Pavlenishvili, Georgia and Wanda Nowicka from Poland – addressed the growing religious fundamentalism in CEE.<sup>1</sup>*

**KEYWORDS** *religious fundamentalism; European Union; Catholic Church; youth; abortion; contraception*

### **About ASTRA**

ASTRA was created as the regional network in December 1999 by ten organizations from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The Network works for the advancement of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as fundamental human rights, and advocates for their observance, prioritization and implementation on the international, regional and national agendas. In 2008, ASTRA increased its membership to 29 organizations from 18 countries.

### **Rising religious fundamentalism**

Religious fundamentalism is a major obstacle to the realization of SRHR of societies, especially for women and youth in CEE. Religious forces create increasing barriers to sexuality education, family planning and abortion. Breaking down these barriers has become the focus of CEE youth movements and advocacy campaigns aimed at making policymakers accountable to women and youth.

### **Georgia**

The Orthodox Church has always been influential in Georgian society, and has become more influential after the split of the communist regime. Today the social atmosphere in Georgia is characterized by orthodox morals and values that are embedded in the educational system. The Orthodox Church actively campaigns against abortion

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and contraception, and is opposed to sexual instruction in schools. There is no sexual education in school curricula. There is a high percentage of women (58 percent) who have never used contraception, and there is a considerable gap between awareness of a contraceptive method and knowledge of how that procedure or product is used. Orthodox Christian organizations warn against abortions. Gynaecological consulting rooms have posters stating that abortion is murder. The association against abortion works with doctors and medical students. They claim to prevent one abortion every second.

### Ukraine

In Ukraine there are also strong anti-choice groups. Christian churches are opposed to the introduction of sexual education at school. For example, organizations working with ASTRA trying to impart sexual education were confronted by priests who disrupted classes and tried to prevent them from proceeding. A compromise was reached with the Church – that teenagers could choose whether to attend our classes or to discuss sublimation matters with the priest's wife. This only worked temporarily, as priests began to create obstacles to the distribution of condoms and booklets being handed out by pro-choice organizations.

### Croatia

Croatia signed an agreement with the Vatican granting the Church a privileged position within the state. According to this agreement, the values of Christian ethics have to be taken into consideration throughout the educational system. The Catholic Church infiltrated the educational system through religious education in kindergartens and in the state schools. The decision to introduce religious education, that is, Catholic instruction, was a Government decision that was made without any public or parliamentary debate. Today, the social atmosphere in Croatia is characterized by Catholic morals and values that are an important part of the educational system and are supported by the state institutions. The Catholic

Church is especially concerned about controlling young people's sexuality.

### Poland

In Poland, attempts to restrict all forms of reproductive rights are relentless. In 2007, the attempt to introduce the protection of life from the moment of conception into the Polish Constitution failed by a narrow margin. If it had passed, it would have meant a complete ban on abortion. Currently, ASTRA is involved in the struggle against the attempt to severely restrict access to *in vitro* fertilization procedures for sterile couples.

### Religious fundamentalism in the region

Religious fundamentalism, especially Christian, is one of the major forces hindering the implementation of SRHR in the CEE region. Due to the Enlargement Process, the European Union (EU) is being increasingly influenced by conservative forces from new member states such as Poland and Lithuania. Women in the region are now always worried whenever officials propose a discussion of SRHR.

The EU draft anti-discrimination directive (implementing the principle of equal treatment irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation) explicitly excludes reproductive rights from its scope, although there are numerous international commitments and liberal legislation in the vast majority of European countries that speak of SRHR. This is a sign of how SRHR is now becoming controversial at the EU level due to conservative influences. As the EU is the main donor in developing countries, the negative impact of European conservatism is spreading beyond Europe, and may affect EU funding for women and men in the developing world.

Religious and conservative forces are increasingly powerful: they impact strongly on law, policies and public discourse in the region, especially as the civil societies are still very weak. Women's movements have certainly made significant progress in promoting women's and human rights;

however, they have not been strong enough to overcome increasing barriers.

### **Working with youth**

Strengthening and repoliticizing movements in Europe is an important long-term strategy to fight these negative trends. Nurturing inter-generational dialogue and collaboration of older women with younger generations can build sustainable, multi-generational movements.

ASTRA members facilitate the establishment of youth groups at the regional and national levels, such as ASTRA Youth, who run independent programmes in collaboration with ASTRA. Such a model of independence and collaboration seems to be working well. Young people have to feel

free and speak for themselves. The benefits of collaboration between older and younger activists across generations include not only experience, but also innovation and creativity, and contribute to future sustainability.

Multi-generational dialogues improve messages and outreach to the younger generation, and potentially strengthen our movements. Although young activists should have access to the spaces of older activists, they should be encouraged to create their own. They should participate in decision-making and strategizing processes, but should have their own decision-making spaces. Older activists should contribute resources to enable young activists to start off, but the younger generation should also be encouraged and supported in creating their own initiatives and gathering resources.

### **Note**

- 1 On ASTRA's website, [www.astra.org.pl](http://www.astra.org.pl), there is a section on AWID forum that includes three documentaries and presentations.

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