

Croatia and the backlash against women's rights

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On 24 March 2018, over 5000 people from all over Croatia assembled in the capital city of Zagreb to march against Croatia's forthcoming ratification of the Istanbul Convention. As the world's first binding treaty to address violence against women, this Council of Europe document has generally received widespread support. But in Croatia, it has been met with fierce, media-backed opposition by (neo-)conservative groups, some of which are closely tied to the Catholic Church.

"We don't want our children to learn in schools that they are neither 'she' nor 'he', that they are 'it'," said Tomislav, a young protestor in his twenties. "We don't want Brussels to tell us what to do here [in our country]. It is not about women's protection at all ; it is about getting money for the left-wing NGOs," said Neda, a small and outspoken woman in her forties, when asked why she was marching.

Right-wing, conservative groups in Croatia are strongly opposed to the convention, which was ratified on 13 April 2018, claiming it "imposes gender ideology" on women and that it endangers "traditional family values".

The text of the convention, in fact, differentiates the terms "sex" (as a group of biological characteristics) and "gender" (as socially constructed roles that a society might attribute to men or women). It also promotes education based on gender equality and the end of gender roles. However, this has been interpreted in some quarters to mean that children will be able to 'choose their own sex' as early as primary school, and that a 'third gender' will become a new legally-recognised category.

"In our society, there are dominant clerical trends that are opposed to the sex equality, but also to a democratic society that respects [people's] differences and that claims equal rights for everyone," explains Neva Tolle, coordinator of [Autonomna ženska kuća Zagreb](#) (Autonomous Women's House Zagreb), an NGO that provides female victims of domestic violence with housing and legal support.

"It is shameful that political points get scored on this serious societal problem [violence against women]. Female victims of male violence are a marginalised group and they are extremely vulnerable. We should not forget that the violence against women is the most visible form of discrimination and inequality between the sexes," she says.

For Tolle, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Croatia has been a necessity for years. "The current legal framework in Croatia is not satisfactory as it doesn't offer adequate protection to women victims of domestic violence," she says. According to [statistics from the Ministry of Interior](#), from 2013 to 2017, 159 people were killed in Croatia : 91 were women, 63 of which were killed by people close to them, 46 by their partners.

Tolle believes the convention will push national legislators to adapt Croatian laws according to the international standards of the treaty, while introducing tougher sentences for those convicted of crimes related to domestic violence. In addition, school curricula will have to include materials on gender equality, she emphasises.

Down an illiberal path

Although the convention caused divisions within the ruling conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party, it was eventually ratified by parliament with 110 votes to 30 (and two abstentions) this April.

“I think that the ratification of the convention is great news, not because we are expecting great changes to happen straight away, but because on a symbolical level, when it comes to the balance of power between conservative and progressive forces, it was an important victory [for the latter],” says Bojana Genov, an activist and coordinator with [Ženska mreža Hrvatske](#) (Women’s Network Croatia).

For Genov, the mobilisation against the Istanbul Convention was only “the tip of the iceberg”, the best coordinated and the most visible part of the conservative backlash against women’s and civic rights in Croatia.

In 2013, when Croatia joined the European Union, a then unknown NGO named *U ime obitelji* (In the Name of the Family) launched a referendum that [eventually amended the constitution](#) to stipulate that marriage can only be a union between a man and a woman.

The country shifted further towards to the right in 2016 when the then culture minister Zlatko Hasanbegovic (at the time, a prominent figure of the nationalist right) cut funds for state-subsidised independent media and NGOs.

At the same time, the national public broadcaster HRT began running shows more aligned to the ruling coalition’s conservative and religious ideology.

The rise of conservative ideologies is not unique to Croatia, not is its negative impact on women : both Bulgaria and Slovakia failed to ratify of the Istanbul Convention ; in Poland, the governing party’s [crackdown on democracy and civil liberties](#) has extended to [women’s access to abortion](#) ; and Hungary has positioned itself as a guardian of traditional values and an “illiberal democracy”.

“I think that these trends have been present in the country since 1991 [when Croatia became an independent state after breaking away from Yugoslavia] ; not only in the recent years,” says Hrvoje Klasic, a history professor at the University of Zagreb. “Conservative and right-wing actors gain more power when the leader of the HDZ is weak,” he explains. In other words, when Croatia’s biggest right-wing party doesn’t have a strong parliamentary majority (as has been the case since 2015), it doesn’t hesitate to court those who stand even further right on the political spectrum in a bid to secure parliamentary political allies.

Women’s bodies as an ideological battlefield

In Croatia, conservative movements have found an important ally in the Catholic Church. Despite officially being a secular state, over 85 per cent of the Croatian population are Roman Catholic. As a result, the Church has significant influence in all areas of life ; and nowhere is this more keenly felt than in the debate over abortion rights.

Abortion has been legal in Croatia within the first ten weeks of pregnancy since 1978. After ten weeks, women are only permitted to have an abortion in cases of sexual misconduct or potential birth defects. In addition, in 2003, a law was introduced to allow medical professionals to exercise their right to conscientiously object to performing an abortion.

“While the right to abortion exists in the theory, it is actually really hard to get one,” says Genov.

“In some hospitals, all the doctors, as well as the medical staff, decline to perform them,” she says, adding that while the right to an abortion is already limited, changing the law will only restrict it further.

Since Croatia ‘inherited’ its current law from Yugoslavian legislation, pro-life groups have been demanding a ban on abortions for decades, declaring the current (read : old) law as ‘unconstitutional’. In March 2017, Croatia’s constitutional court ruled that while the current law does not breach the constitution, parliament must pass new legislation within two years. This new law will not ban abortion, but it should “strike a balance between women’s right to privacy and the protection of unborn life”.

For Genov, the concept of “pre-abortion counselling”, that the new law could introduce, is especially problematic : “There is no reason to think that women should be counselled, as if they are not capable of making such a decision by themselves.

“In Croatia, for instance, we don’t have sex education in schools. That’s a paradox : legislators could introduce counselling for women who are over 18, already grown up and pregnant, before letting them proceed with the abortion, while at the same time they are not giving the opportunity to young girls to learn about their sexuality, about their reproductive health and their rights,” Genov laments.

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