

# Countering Antichoice Forces in Europe

By Neil Datta

**T**HE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF Europe is split at its core. Parliamentarians, who all claim to have the best interests of their constituents at heart, are divided about how to deal with a central element of humanity: sex.

Sex, sexuality, family planning—these are demographic questions that must skate between personal freedom and collective responsibility. One of the competing philosophies is to speak openly about these issues and propose solutions that protect human rights. The other approach retreats into lofty theory, refusing to acknowledge that with or without God, sex will still happen and its consequences will impact the collective wellbeing.

European lawmakers who possess a modern, realistic and human rights-based understanding of sex—its motivations, consequences and dangers—are currently facing opposition from a range of forces. Whether religious or secular, these forces are exerting an influence in policies both domestically and abroad, as

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**NEIL DATTA** is Secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (EPF). EPF ([www.epfweb.org](http://www.epfweb.org)) is a network of members of parliaments from across Europe who are committed to protecting the sexual and reproductive health of the world's most vulnerable people, both at home and overseas.

the way that demographic questions are dealt with by governments and development policy is one of the most politicized areas of political discourse at present. A better understanding of some of the leading challenges and the tactics used to oppose improved sexual and reproductive health and rights policies may be useful. These opposition forces affect advocates and lawmakers alike who share a commitment to reproductive rights and to the European notions of a more liberal, secular and progressive society.

## PRESSURES CREATED BY RELIGIOUS VIEWS OF SEXUALITY

Religious dogma is the greatest single driver in conservative efforts to retain the taboo status of sex, sexuality and family planning in public discourse. Making any of these areas untouchable limits women's right to have control over their reproduction.

This restrictive undercurrent flows from the Vatican, from staunchly Catholic governments such as the Philippines and Malta (among others) and from the influence of the Holy See in public forums such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe. It is also mirrored in the values espoused by countless Muslim countries across Asia and Africa, where sex until recently was only referred to as a means to procreate, and where women are often still objectified and denied control of their own fertility.



Sophie In 't Veld, Dutch Member of European Parliament, has noted the rise of conservative forces in Europe.

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Religion is also at the heart of the efforts to limit modern forms of contraception in places like Eastern Europe. In many former Soviet countries, church groups have been quick to fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of communism. Religion and national identity, both suppressed by Communist regimes for over forty years, have had a resurgence together in countries like Hungary, which is encoding Christianity—and limits to women's control over their reproduction—in the Constitution.

Some of the world's faithful are steadfast in the belief that life begins at conception, that an unborn child's rights are greater than those of an expectant mother and that these convictions provide the moral foundation upon which the entire framework of society's values is constructed. Followers of these beliefs frequently push to see them recognized by their national lawmakers. This mixing of the political with the religious can be perplexing for those who feel it makes

politicians and governments stray from their responsibility of running their countries to decide upon the answers to existential questions better answered by a person's choice of faith tradition.

#### A NEW DIMENSION STEMMING FROM DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE

Religious forces are not the only challenge for parliamentarians committed to helping the world find rights-based solutions for its demographic challenges. While national populations are booming across Africa and many parts of Asia, countries like the Russian Federation are experiencing the onset of a demographic winter, with populations set to shrink consider-

potential to gain support rapidly with the help of simplistic and populist arguments. To a casual observer looking for quick fixes it would be tempting to think that banning abortion would help solve population decline, or that claims from a conservative group that homosexuality threatens the family—and therefore the birth rate—are justified. However, such solutions will serve only to deprive people of their human rights and do little to help society to increase its population.

Those preoccupied with protecting the rights of women in the developing world must also find innovative solutions to end demographic decline, with some working examples to be found in France and

#### INFLUENCE OF MODERATE CONSERVATIVES

A further pressure facing parliamentarians in donor countries stems from more moderate conservatives, who use the austerity measures that donor countries are all experiencing at present, along with a worry about the Western world's declining birth rates, to support a more general domestic national tendency toward isolationism and a reduction in foreign aid. They also hinge upon depictions of countries such as China and India as developing so rapidly that they would appear to require little assistance from overseas.

It is easy for citizens and politicians to feel that development aid overseas should

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ably within a generation as a result of a range of social and public health circumstances that are not linked to religion. A new dimension to the population debate is forming because the needs and concerns of areas with declining populations are very real—and very different from those experienced elsewhere, especially in the developing world.

This facet in demographic discourse has added complexity to the debate about issues like family planning far beyond the religiously motivated antichoice camp. Advocates in favor of a rights-based approach to population dynamics must be careful not to alienate themselves from the challenges posed by declining population in some parts of the world. Otherwise, they may unwittingly provide an opportunity for ad hoc coalitions to grow between countries facing demographic decline and parties opposed to sexual and reproductive rights—even if they don't coincide on ideology.

It is worrying for the sexual and reproductive health and rights community to note that these relationships also have the

Sweden. In recent decades France has employed several policies to achieve two goals: reconciling family life with work and reversing declining fertility. To accomplish the first goal, for example, France instituted generous child-care subsidies. To accomplish the second, families have been rewarded for having at least three children. Sweden, by contrast, reversed the fertility declines it experienced in the 1970s through a different mix of policies, none of which specifically had the objective of raising fertility. Its parental work policies during the 1980s allowed many women to raise children while remaining in the workforce. The mechanisms for doing so were flexible work schedules, quality child care and extensive parental leave on reasonable economic terms.

Such solutions will take time to bring to fruition, but they are not contradictory to a rights-based approach to population dynamics. Above all, the activities of advocates for women's rights in population issues must not allow religious groups to win over those that are suffering a demographic decline.

be cut before domestic spending on education and the economy, and that donor countries should deal with their own reproductive health issues before becoming involved in those that are thousands of miles away. This viewpoint, which has gained prominence within Western Europe recently, could provide more religiously oriented antichoice forces with a further source of supporters.

#### THE INCREASING ROLE OF RELIGION IN EUROPEAN PUBLIC DEBATE

In recent years the role that religion plays within Europe has increasingly come under the spotlight in public discourse, largely in reaction to waves of immigration from predominantly Muslim countries. There is an uncertainty about how Islam will fit with the 150-year tradition of European secularism, which grants a comprehensive set of freedoms to the individual, including the right to choose a value system. Europe is still in the process of deciding how to grant citizens these individual freedoms, whilst reconciling this principle with allowing people to practice a religion which some

take as justification to treat women differently than men. This uncertain role of religion and religious tolerance within Europe is therefore also having an impact on parliamentarians' attitudes to reproductive health, as religious allegiances (held by MPs or by their electorates) are often crucial in defining politicians' approaches to divisive issues such as family planning and sexuality education.

Politicians that are particularly interested by immigration could find their opinions corresponding with either side of the debate that has been outlined here. As a result, they could form strong alliances on some issues with the enemies of rights-based reproductive advocacy. Similarly, representatives of Islam might

suit their ends, but which fail to take the wider context into account. (One such example was an attempt by opposition forces to prove that Ireland's particularly low levels of maternal mortality were linked to the illegality of abortion in Ireland. However, statistics show that most Irish women can afford to obtain one in the UK, so the illegality of abortion in Ireland has little effect on domestic levels of maternal mortality.)

Opposition forces have also been seen to exert their influence at the Council of Europe in purely logistical ways, such as by ensuring that votes about their most contentious issues take place at the end of the week, when many parliamentarians will already have returned to their con-

vative forces outlined above is a worry for Europe, showing that "women's rights, gay rights and healthcare are all under threat." But at the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development, we have now been tracking these trends for over a decade, and in this context we see less reason to fear Europe's new so-called "religious right." For while the continent has swung slightly to the right in recent years, development aid is still at record levels, and the pressure that is being exerted on national governments by civil society to honor their pledges to achieve targets such as the Millennium Development Goals and the ICPD Programme of Action is intense and well directed.

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also find reasons to forge alliances with conservative forces concerned by reproductive issues if their interests coincide.

**THE TECHNIQUES USED BY OPPOSITION FORCES**

In recent years the opposition has managed to achieve political results in a range of simple, effective and often highly misleading ways. The European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development and its partners across Europe have seen opposition forces mobilize at crucial moments ahead of important votes in the European Parliament and in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, sending letters to parliamentarians to spell out their side of the argument at hand. They also arrange parliamentary hearings and events, where their representatives gain a platform for publicizing their opinions. In their communications activities there has in recent years been a perceptibly growing reliance on false data, where conclusions are drawn from statistics to

stituencies. They also engulf proposed legislation with floods of amendments, thereby managing to delay decision-making processes as long as possible and sometimes causing the whole project in question to be scrapped. This often has the effect of scaring some members of parliament from becoming involved with reproductive health issues, which they view as being too difficult to deal with satisfactorily, and can lead to fatigue among those who support the issue.

**CONCLUSIONS**

It is clear that parliamentarians in favor of finding modern, rights-based solutions to the reproductive health issues facing the world are confronted by a range of direct and indirect challenges at present, and that opposition forces are managing to make their voices heard. Sophie in 't Veld, Dutch MEP and member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe, recently described this with a note of alarm as the "rise of Europe's religious right." For her the existence of the conser-

The voices in opposition are loud, but this does not necessarily spell disaster for the protectors of Europe's liberal, secular and progressive values. And now, in order to gain the support that modern forms of contraception—and a rights-based approach to reproductive health issues—deserve, it is essential that parliamentarians depoliticize the issue as much as possible. It is an issue that can be best supported by scientific facts that prove the overall value that women, societies, the environment and humankind will gain if they invest in empowering women in their reproductive choices.

Personal religious freedoms must not be used as a banner for robbing women of their human rights. Instead they should show what each citizen can do to promote the wellbeing of those who are most vulnerable. After all, each mainstream political party in Europe does have a value base that can support sexual and reproductive health and rights. Our task is to tap into this base in a way that is in accordance with each party's set of values. ■