

February 2021 NEWSLETTER **in** NUMBERS

90% of EU target population to receive HPV vaccination by 2030 in EU Beating Cancer Plan

4 Reasons why Poland's war on abortion should scare you

56 MPs attend webinar to coordinate joint action to support Polish women

In the news

EPF NEWS

Four reasons why Poland's war on abortion should scare you



By Neil Datta, EPF Secretary

Poland's near-total abortion ban came into effect last week when it was published in the country's official government gazette. Polish hospitals and medical practitioners are no longer allowed to carry out an abortion in the case of a foetal anomaly. Such cases made up the great majority of terminations performed in the country, which, even before the new ban, already had the harshest abortion law in Europe – now, abortions are only permitted in cases of rape and incest and when the mother's life or health are endangered.

What's happening in Poland right now shouldn't be seen as merely typical behaviour by the Polish state. This is not just 'Poland being Poland'. These actions are illegal, inhumane and could infiltrate the rest of Europe – and this is just the beginning.

It's illegal

Poland's Constitutional Tribunal, which issued the anti-abortion ruling is itself of highly contested legitimacy. Putting aside the substance of the ruling, the current tribunal is the result of a [political power play](#) by the ruling PiS (Law and Justice) party that evicted the previous judges and replaced them with judges more amenable to the party's political agenda. The former judges have not recognised their eviction nor their newly installed replacements. Thus, the Constitutional Tribunal itself is the subject of fundamental democratic contestation in Poland, and the European Commission has raised concerns about it in its ongoing proceedings about infringement of the rule of law in Poland.

As for the recent anti-abortion decision, one of the newly appointed judges on the tribunal was herself, prior to being appointed, one of the parliamentarians who signed the parliamentary motion asking the Constitutional Tribunal to judge on the matter of the constitutionality of abortion in the case of foetal anomaly.

It's inhumane

The provisions of the judgement go beyond the philosophical question of 'right to choose' versus 'right to life'. By banning abortion for foetal anomaly, the Constitutional Tribunal is interfering in medical decisions that [should be left to a woman](#) and her loved ones, in consultation with her medical provider.

The blanket ban just enacted will force Polish women to carry a non-viable pregnancy to term, thereby creating untold physical and psychological damage. Other provisions of Poland's draconian abortion law impose prison sentences on those assisting women who terminate their pregnancy, including doctors, partners and family members.

There is already a case of a woman's [boyfriend being sentenced](#) to six months in prison for having driven his girlfriend to hospital after she started bleeding heavily from taking an abortion pill at home.

It's just the beginning

The current abortion ruling is not the result of popular will, it is the result of an illegitimate Constitutional Tribunal that did what the PiS government failed to achieve in 2016 with its legislative proposal to ban abortion. The government shelved that legislation after [massive protests](#).

Behind these initiatives hides a powerful outfit called the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture. Ordo Iuris styles itself an independent conservative think tank; in reality, it is an [extremist religious organisation](#) and its leaders have created a web of reactionary organisations in Poland and beyond.

Ordo Iuris lawyers [drafted the text of the 2016 bill to ban abortion](#), as well as other legal texts, including arguments for [leaving the Istanbul Convention](#) on violence against women, and bills that criminalised [comprehensive sexuality education](#), and [restrict in-vitro fertilisation](#) and a charter that created Poland's now infamous '[LGBT-free zones](#)'.

Ordo Iuris is able to make such progress because it has [infiltrated](#) the inner workings of the Polish state. For example, Ordo Iuris's founder now sits on the Polish Supreme Court and other Ordo Iuris alumni [occupy important positions](#) in government ministries, academia, the judiciary and other public institutions including advising the Polish president.

It could spread to the rest of Europe

Poland is serving as a test bed for reactionary ideas to be exported to other countries. Investigative journalists have [revealed](#) how organisations under Ordo Iuris's control have established tentacles in many EU member states. These organisations have started testing the waters in their own countries with the same ultra-conservative agendas. In Croatia, it was the Istanbul Convention, in Estonia it was a referendum on LGBT rights and in Lithuania abortion. The same investigative journalists found that Ordo Iuris spent millions of euros to set up these foreign affiliates – and each one will try to emulate what they see as accomplishments in Poland. And Ordo Iuris has further ambitions. On 29 January, the Polish government formally submitted Aleksander Stępkowski, the founder of Ordo Iuris, as one of Poland's [candidates for the European Court of Human Rights](#).

What we are seeing in Poland is just the beginning. The beginning of the erosion of fundamental rights through pseudo-legal processes; first targeting women, then sexual minorities. Soon everybody will be concerned.

It is also the beginning of exporting Poland's ultra-conservatism beyond its borders. Thanks to Ordo Iuris's international network, what happens in Poland will not stay in Poland. Unless Europeans take heed of the dramatic changes occurring in Poland and use all the tools at their disposal to uphold democracy and the rule of law – including by supporting the courageous movement within Poland that is fighting back against this democratic backsliding – then the same fate looms for many European countries.

[Read the Open Democracy article](#)

[Read the Spanish translation](#)

[Read the German translation](#)

High level event on Eliminating Cervical Cancer Together



Hon. Chrysoula ZACHAROPOULOU, MEP

renew europe.

Eliminating Cervical Cancer Together.

Join Chrysoula Zacharopoulou, MEP, at the expert discussion with EU, Africa & WHO high representatives, including:

- Ms Stella Kyriakides, EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety
- H.E. Pr. Benjamin Hounkpatin, Minister of Health, Republic of Benin
- H.E. Delphine O, Secretary General, Generation Equality Forum

When? 25 February 2021, 11:00-13:00 (CET)
Register to join the virtual debate on Zoom

ONLINE, 25 February 2021 - Cervical cancer is a major public health issue around the world. Globally, 570,000 new cases are diagnosed each year, with 311,000 deaths. In the European Union, every year 33,000 cases are detected and 15,000 women die from this disease. Yet cervical cancer is preventable and curable when detected early and treated adequately.

Last year the global community demonstrated an unprecedented determination to eliminate cervical cancer: in November 2020, WHO launched its Global strategy aiming to reduce mortality from cervical cancer and the European Commission launched its Beating Cancer Plan on 3 February 2021.

Together with EPF, MEPs for SRR member Hon. Chrysoula Zacharopoulou, MEP co-hosted a high-level event to build on this momentum and bring together the European Commission, the WHO, Members of Parliaments and Governments, the scientific community as well as civil society for a dialogue to mobilise, find synergies and join forces to concretise the global goals to eliminate cervical cancer.

Ms Stella Kyriakides gave the first keynote speech to introduce the Europe Beating Cancer Plan, followed by WHO's Assistant Director-General, Dr Princess Nothema Simelela's introduction to the Global Strategy.

"Behind cervical cancer rates are women. Wives, mothers, daughters & friends, whose lives have been turned upside down by cervical cancer. Let us keep them and all cancer patients in our minds as we strive together to make cancer a thing of the past" - Ms Stella Kyriakides, EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety

"The big differences in mortality and incidence between countries are not due to any peculiarity of how cancer developed but due to inequitable access to its prevention and treatment. We need to advocate strongly to ensure that the tools are accessible at an affordable price and that they are available for low- and middle-income countries" - Dr Nothemba Simelela, WHO Assistant Director-General for Strategic Priorities

The first panel focused on fighting cervical cancer in Europe, with EPF Executive Committee member Hon. Dovile Šakalienė, MP, and Neil Datta, EPF Secretary giving an overview of inequality in access to HPV vaccination and cervical screening in Europe.

The second panel shed light on the similarities and differences in tackling the elimination challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa – taking into account coverage, equity, health system challenges and the contributing role of high HIV & AIDS rates.

Other high-level speakers include:

- H.E. Pr. **Benjamin Hounkpatin**, Minister of Health, Republic of Benin
- H.E. **Delphine O**, Secretary General, Generation Equality Forum
- H.E. **Sika Kaboré**, First Lady of Burkina Faso

To conclude the session, Hon. Zacharopoulou expressed her willingness to meet again to ensure progress of the Cancer Plan and WHO Strategy implementations in 2022.

[Read Ms Kyriakides' speech](#)

MPs advocate for contraception access on Valentine's Day



ONLINE - This year, on the occasion of Valentine's Day, EPF launched a communications campaign encouraging MPs to speak up on the importance of contraception availability and access.

We sparked a discussion among MPs on the value of family planning for a safe and consensual relationships of by sending a physical copy of the European Contraception Policy Atlas and accompanying chocolates with a variety of contraceptive methods depicted on them - because similar to a box of chocolates, family planning should have lots of great options and everyone should be able to choose their favourite!

EPF Secretary joins panel for European Parliament hearing on Poland



BRUSSELS, 24 February 2021 - A joint hearing organised by the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs and the Women's Rights and Gender Equality committees focused on attacks on abortion rights and breaches of the rule of law in Poland.

MEPs exchanged views with Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli and H.E. Andrzej Sadoś, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Poland to the EU.

External panelists included:

- Wojciech HERMELIŃSKI, attorney, former Judge of the Constitutional Tribunal, Chair of the National Electoral Commission from 2014 to 2019,
- Marta LEMPART, Leader of the Polish Women on Strike movement,
- Neil DATTA, Secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, and
- Dorota BOJEMSKA, Chair of the Family Council at the Ministry of Family and Social Policy in Poland.

"Resolutions on abortion rights & LGBT-free zones have not halted the deterioration of human rights and rule of law in Poland. Now is the time for the European Parliament to be more ambitious in the measures it takes". - Neil Datta, EPF Secretary

[Watch the meeting recording](#)

[Read the European Parliament Press Release](#)

[Four Reasons why Poland's war on abortion should scare you - By Neil Datta](#)

Parliamentarians coordinate joint action to support Polish women in light of the near-total abortion ban

MPs for PL women



BRUSSELS - On February 4, 2021, 56 European parliamentarians met to agree on a joint course of action in solidarity with Polish women in response to the near total ban on abortions in Poland.

Previously, on January 27, Poland's government put into effect a constitutional court decision banning termination of pregnancies with foetal defects. It happened 97 days after the verbal announcement on October 22, which sparked the largest protests in Poland since 1989. The decision stands in direct opposition with good medical practice and international human rights.

Members of Parliament and EPF partners from across Europe met virtually in to brainstorm and coordinate actions in collaboration with Polish MPs to reverse anti-women legislation of the Polish government.

Action points:

Following the meeting, the MPs have decided to organise small protests in front of Polish embassies in Europe on International Women's Day. These protests will be done in collaboration with local CSO/NGOs to strengthen their impact. Protests will include a call of action for Polish women.

In addition, MPs have jointly-prepared a manifesto to release it in their own languages and increase political media attention on the issue and the show European MPs condemnation of the discriminatory Polish legislation affecting Polish women.

Beyond 2020 Roundtable: European donor support to SRHR and FP in the coming decade



ONLINE, 2nd February - In the context of the '[Not Without FP Forum](#)', EPF teamed up with IPPF European Network and DSW to organise a roundtable discussion on European donor support to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and family planning (FP) in the coming decade.

The period 2019-2020 was one of contrasts: on the one hand, 2019 broke new ground for overall European support to SRHR - in terms of funding and in terms of new commitments and momentum, with the Nairobi ICPD+25 Summit in 2019, and the renewal of the FP2020 partnership this year. On the flip side, the Coronavirus that spread across the world in 2020 will most likely have a drastic impact on European Official Development Assistance (ODA), including for SRHR.

Moderated by Head of the DSW EU office, Cecile Vernant, the event began with a closer look at recent donor funding trends and contributions to SRHR and FP as highlighted in the [Donors Delivering for SRHR report](#) and in the [Countdown 2030 Europe](#) data.

The panel included:

- Titta Maja, Deputy Director General for the Development Policy Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs from Finland, who gave a European donor perspective;
- Hon. Abdul Rashid Pelpuo, Member of Parliament from Ghana, who shed light on how national policymakers in Ghana have tried to contribute to the further advancement of the ICPD agenda after Nairobi in the past year, and how European donors can streamline the relevance of its SRHR funding to fit the needs of the most vulnerable;
- Joshua Ongwae, International Programme Coordinator & Regional Team Lead at [DSW](#) from Kenya, who gave a civil society perspective on budget accountability and the opportunities and challenges around SRHR and FP funding at national and subnational level in Kenya.

European Commissioner Stella Kyriakides reacts to parliamentary letter on access to cervical cancer prevention



22 February 2021 - Ahead of the launch of the [European Union's Beating Cancer Plan](#), members of EPF's Executive Committee wrote [a joint letter to Ms. Stella Kyriakides](#), European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety. Today, Commissioner Kyriakides sent a reply, outlining her shared concern about inequalities in accessing cervical cancer prevention and treatment in Europe and her optimism for the new Beating Cancer Plan.

"I am very pleased that with Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, we are marking the beginning of a new era in cancer prevention and care. With this Plan, we will help Europe to lead in the fight against cancer and will support Member States and stakeholders turn the tide against cancer. As you rightly say, it is a once in a generation opportunity to increase our joint efforts to address cancers linked to HPV."

"I am pleased to underline the important partnership with stakeholders including Members of national Parliaments, on improving the health and wellbeing of all EU citizens and stimulating positive change. One such area is clearly cancer prevention and care. I look forward to working together towards a strong European Health Union and a more secure, better-prepared and more resilient EU that delivers positive change for citizens, including in the area of cancer."

[Read the full letter here](#)

EPF President Petra Bayr speaks up against FGM



VIENNA - On the occasion of End Female Genital Mutilation Day (06.02.), EPF President and founder and spokesperson of the stopFGM platform, Hon. Petra Bayr, MP (Austria), urges fellow European governments to call for the fight against this harmful practice to be continued and for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) to be ended worldwide by 2030.

"The fight against FGM must continue nationally and internationally - especially because of the negative impact of the Corona crisis on the practice". She continues, "Increased poverty and school closures increase the risk of girls becoming victims of FGM".

Further explaining the relationship between the pandemic and the risk for girls to fall victim to female genital mutilation, EPF President, Petra Bayr notes that the cases of FGM are increasing internationally. The reason for this being the impoverishment of families due to job losses, social isolation and also school closures. It is therefore crucial to draw more attention to the linkage between this growing phenomenon and its causes.

"It is important to critically question activities, to celebrate successes achieved, to plan new steps and to remind those politically responsible to actively stand up against this ritual which manifests gender inequality," Bayr demands.

Zooming in on the status-quo in Austria, where between 12-18% of girls with origins in countries where FGM is practiced fall victim to this practice, Bayr highlights that:

"In order to strengthen the fight against FGM in Austria, further political measures must be taken. It is important to avoid stigmatisation. The well-being of the affected women and their daughters must be prioritised. In addition, further training of health personnel who come into contact FGM cases, systematic data collection and sensitisation need to contribute to better action against FGM in Austria in the future."

Read the original German Press Release via the link below:

[Bayr: Kampf gegen FGM muss weitergeführt werden](#)

EPF joins HPV Action Network



In February 2021, EPF joined the HPV Action Network of the European Cancer Organisation as an invited stakeholder. The European Cancer Organisation brings together 34 organisations across Europe who aim to work on the European level to reduce the burden of cancer and improve the quality of care for cancer patients. The HPV Network is among ECCO's 9 topical stakeholder groups joining organisations and individuals from a wide range of backgrounds who share the ambitious but highly achievable goal of eliminating all the cancers and other diseases caused by HPV across the European region.

[Visit ECCO's webpage](#)

EUROPEAN COMMISSION NEWS

"This is real prevention" - The EU releases its Beating Cancer Plan



3 February 2021 - EPF welcomes Europe's Beating Cancer Plan as a flagship health initiative that can deliver real added value for Europeans.

The EU budget has earmarked €4bn to address cancer and the plan centres around four key areas: prevention, early detection, diagnosis and treatment and improving quality of life of both cancer patients and survivors.

The Beating Cancer Plan also foresees the establishment of a Cancer Inequalities Registry to “identify challenges and guide investments and interventions” at EU and national levels.

On cervical cancer specifically, the Plan commits to prevent all cancers caused by HPV through gender neutral vaccination with goals to:

- vaccinate at least 90% of the EU target population of girls and to significantly increase the vaccination of boys by 2030;
- establish a new EU-supported Cancer Screening Scheme to help Member States ensure that 90% of the EU population who qualify for cervical cancer screenings are offered screening by 2025;
- update EU Cancer Screening Recommendations.

“We aim to eliminate cancers caused by the human papillomaviruses and we are proposing support for Member States on vaccinations, with an aim to vaccinate at least 90% of the target population of boys and girls by 2030. This is real prevention.” - Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety

The Commission will now establish the EU Cancer Plan Implementation Group to align actions and policies across the European Commission and other EU institutions.

[Read the EU Beating Cancer Plan here](#)

PACE NEWS

MPs at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe condemn the Polish Abortion Ban



ONLINE - In a joint statement, Members of Parliaments representing the SOC, ALDE and UEL political groups in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, expressed their deep concern about the recent de-facto abortion ban of by the Polish Constitutional Tribunal.

Amidst nation-wide protests since the initial verbal announcement of the de-facto abortion ban, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal published a written justification for illegalising abortions due to severe and irreversible foetal defects on Wednesday 27 January 2021.

In reaction to the new law, the parliamentarians released the following statement in solidarity with Polish women:

The decision stands in the direct opposition with good medical practice, international human rights, and [WHO recommendations](#). Additionally, it infringes upon the [Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner's obligations](#) for the Member States to ensure access to abortion care, specifying that any refusal of care on grounds of religion or belief by a medical professional may never be allowed to jeopardise women's right to access sexual and reproductive health services. The law would harm women's equality, dignity, autonomy, and bodily integrity, restricting their access to information and their rights to private life and health.

The deterioration of the SRHR rights in Poland is a consequence of the erosion of the democratic institutions in the country, including unlawful appointment of judges to the Constitutional Tribunal.

We, therefore, urge Polish ruling coalition to respect the fundamental rights of all Poles to make autonomous decisions about their own bodies and reproductive abilities, which are at the very core of their fundamental right to equality and privacy concerning intimate matters of physical and psychological integrity, and to refrain from adopting the judgment of the institution internationally recognised as unlawfully adopted.

[Joint statement by the SOC, ALDE, and UEL political groups in the CoE parliamen...](#)

PACE Hearing on Vaccine Hesitancy



STRASBOURG/ONLINE - On 9 February, 2021, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)'s Sub-Committee on Public Health and Sustainable Development jointly with EPF, held a hearing on how to overcome vaccine hesitancy.

EPF President and Chair of *PACE* Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Petra Bayr, MP, opened the second session on session HPV-vaccination and population-wide hesitancy and advocated for gender-neutral vaccination:

In Europe, every year around 26,000 women die from cervical cancer. This disease ranks as the 9th most frequent cancer among women. It is also 2nd most common in female cancer deaths for women aged 15 to 44 years. Today we have clear scientific evidence that diseases caused by HPV can be prevented through vaccination.

In a large [study published in 2020 in the Lancet](#) the researchers investigated the vaccine effectiveness in four Nordic countries: Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The study demonstrated vaccine's 100% effectiveness over 12 years. The HPV vaccination is most effective if provided to both sexes. Unfortunately, most countries in Europe do not currently vaccinate boys.

According to several studies the burden of HPV associated cancers in men in Western Europe is comparable to that in women. By vaccinating both sexes we will faster achieve the "herd immunity" and drastically reduce this disease. We cannot exclude boys from life-saving prevention schemes, it would be a clear case of discrimination.

Following this appeal, EPF Secretary, Neil Datta, presented the findings of the EPF Cervical Cancer Prevention Policy Atlas, highlighting persisting inequalities in prevention and information policies in Europe. The Atlas scores the geographical region of Europe (46 countries) on prevention policies in relation to cervical cancer. It looks at three areas of prevention: primary (HPV vaccinations), secondary prevention (screening programmes), and third it looks at the availability of online information on cervical cancer prevention policies.

"The Atlas clearly illustrates the issue of healthcare inequality across Europe with eastern and southern countries lagging behind in cervical cancer prevention policies. [. . .] Nobody should be denied healthcare based on where they live. All European governments need to do more to raise public awareness around HPV & cervical cancer to ensure more people are covered."

Making the case for vaccinations for both sexes at a young age, Neil Datta shares three incentives: medical, human rights, and financial:

"Men remain at risk of infection from unvaccinated women, also there is greater levels of protection from HPV between the sexes and between same sexes, which increases herd immunity. Additionally, there MSM are not protected by the women-only programmes and HIV-positive populations are particularly vulnerable to the virus"

"Secondly, at a human rights level, there is an understanding that a universal HPV vaccination would give everyone the highest attainable standard of health and not discriminate on the ground of sex. On this note, vaccinating both sexes removes the perception that females bear the sole responsibility to prevent HPV infections"

"Finally, if the previous arguments were not convincing enough, vaccinating is both efficient and cost-effective and is a faster approach to preventing and reducing the incidence of cervical cancer overall."

Neil Datta concluded the presentation with three recommendations for key policy-makers to implement to fight cervical cancer at a national level:

1. Include free and gender-neutral HPV vaccination into routine state vaccination schedules
2. Provide free mature population-based screening programmes which are the only way to reach the entire population and achieve results in saving women's lives.
3. Make evidence-based information about HPV vaccination and screening services and where to reach them publicly available.

The findings of the hearing will feed into the PACE report and later on Resolution titled: "Vaccine hesitancy: a major public health issue" drafted by Senator Vladimir Kruglyi (Russian Federation).

Watch the hearing in full via the link below:

[PACE Hearing Programme and Video: How to overcome vaccine hesitancy?](#)