

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE
RIGHTS GENDER EQUALITY
CHILDREN'S EDUCATION
IMMIGRANTS RIGHTS
FREEDOM FROM VIOLENCE
AND DISCRIMINATION
WOMEN'S RIGHTS
LGBTI RIGHTS



**A ROLLBACK FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS:**
THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION UNDER ATTACK

DECEMBER 2021

A Rollback for Human Rights

The Istanbul Convention Under Attack

THE ADVOCATES FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

December 2021



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The Advocates dedicates this report to the courageous women’s HRDs around the world.

FOREWORD

The Istanbul Convention is an important international law instrument addressing numerous and comprehensive measures to prevent violence against women and domestic violence. The convention has been ratified by [35] countries and enjoys a great deal of support from governments, parliaments, civil society, and other actors. The first general report on the activities of the Group of Experts on Action Against Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) activities shows that nearly all countries have stepped up their efforts in preventing violence against women and domestic violence through the ratification and implementation processes, which has improved the protection and support of survivors, even if much remains to be done.¹ Unfortunately, in recent years, some far-right groups in Europe have initiated systematic campaigns to undermine the Istanbul Convention and block its ratification. Some of these groups openly advocate for anti-gender policies and some publicly express supposedly pro-family agendas that effectively exclude any non-hetero normative family structures. All, however, support agendas that effectively discriminate based on gender and oppose ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Accordingly, this report refers to these various groups and movements as the “opposition.” It is important to explore and analyze who these groups are, where they come from, what their goals are, and how they operate. Importantly, the opposition needs to be named and addressed as it poses a serious threat to the rights of women and children, as well as to gender equality, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The opposition is both delaying and blocking ratification and hindering implementation—thus harming societies and individuals, especially women survivors of violence and their children. The opposition is impeding progress urgently needed to save the lives, health, and freedom of millions of women and girls in Europe and the rest of the world. Many in the opposition instill unreasonable fear in people regarding the convention, such as the fear that it might “contribute to human extinction.” Such demonization and lies are both dangerous and irresponsible. They resemble the denial of COVID-19, which contributed to the uncontrolled spread of the disease, especially within vulnerable populations, and countless unnecessary deaths. Therefore, we need to understand the “anti-gender” movements to be able to counteract their harm through joint efforts of governments, civil society, institutions, and international organizations.

*Rosa Logar, Former GREVIO Member
November 2021*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Council of Europe (CoE) Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention,² was opened for signature on May 11, 2011.³ It entered into force on August 1, 2014 following ratification by the tenth CoE Member State.⁴ The treaty explicitly defines gender-based violence against women and domestic violence as human rights violations⁵ that ratifying states are obligated to prevent and punish.⁶ As of November 2021, 35 countries had ratified the Istanbul Convention.⁷

“IN EUROPE, THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION IS THE MOST POWERFUL LEGAL TOOL IN OUR HANDS.”

[WAVE Step Up! Campaign¹](#)

Since the Istanbul Convention’s entry into force, many of The Advocates’ partners in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Former Soviet Union (FSU) have expressed concern about the growing public and political opposition to the convention. Alarmingly, some opponents of the convention are “anti-gender” and there has been a troubling increase in misinformation about the convention based on so-called “gender ideology.”⁸ Over the last 20 years, the “anti-gender” opposition has grown to become a powerful, transnational movement stalling progress on women’s rights in the name of religious or family traditions.⁹ Civil society has also been overwhelmed by false or misleading attacks on the Istanbul Convention. Among other things, there has been an increase in “gender ideology” propaganda, which has become increasingly coordinated, effective, and widespread. In 2020, Poland announced its intention to withdraw from the treaty, and on March 19, 2021, Turkey’s President Erdoğan took the unprecedented step of signing a decree withdrawing Turkey from the treaty effective July 1, 2021.¹⁰ Other countries have fallen short in implementing its provisions. Additionally, women’s HRDs and their organizations face growing harassment, intimidation, threats, and funding cuts that are often connected to support for the Istanbul Convention and efforts to promote women’s rights generally.¹¹

The Advocates prepared this report to document the opposition to the Istanbul Convention and how the opposition has negatively influenced the debate over ratification. The report’s findings are based on research focusing on Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Turkey, and Ukraine (the “reviewed countries”), as well as interviews with stakeholders from these and other countries. Interviewees include HRDs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) staff, lawyers, parliamentarians, journalists, social workers, medical doctors, members of the clergy and theologians, academics, political party members, and government officials.

This report presents The Advocates’ findings, including an overview of the reviewed countries, background information on the Istanbul Convention, and how it became a target for the opposition. It describes the main organizations and actors opposed to the Istanbul Convention (the “opposition”). The report also documents messages, strategies, and fear tactics employed by many in the opposition. Further, it explains how civil society responds to the backlash, highlighting promising practices and strategies in support of ratification, as well as civil society needs. Finally, the report provides recommendations to counter the backlash, with a view to bringing back public focus and understanding to the Istanbul Convention’s true goals: preventing and combatting violence against women.

“VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS THE MOST SHAMEFUL HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION AND PERHAPS THE MOST PERVASIVE. IT KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES OF, CULTURE, OR WEALTH. AS LONG AS IT CONTINUES, WE CANNOT CLAIM TO BE MAKING REAL PROGRESS TOWARDS EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT, AND PEACE.”

Kofi Annan¹²

myriad other issues, including LGBTI rights, sexual and reproductive rights (SRR), and immigrants’ rights. Increasingly, some in the opposition are also threatening and harming the physical safety and security of HRDs. Many of The Advocates’ partners have reported threats and attacks, as well as frivolous lawsuits designed to intimidate and suppress their human rights activities. The Istanbul Convention, and with it, the right of women to be free from violence, has become collateral damage in a broader transnational movement that opposes many of the rights associated—correctly or not—with the treaty.

The Istanbul Convention builds on decades of international law to explicitly recognize that violence against women is a human rights violation¹³ that requires coordinated, consistent state action to protect and support victims and their children, punish perpetrators, and prevent violence.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Istanbul Convention faces strong opposition across the CEE, the FSU, and in Turkey. This backlash is grounded in the coordinated activism of far-right religious organizations, many based in the U.S., as well as the intervention of Russia to generate resentment toward the West.

It is important to keep in mind that many of the same individuals, organizations, and networks—as well as their messaging, strategies, and fear tactics—that oppose the Istanbul Convention are also attacking

The Opposition's Myriad Political Policy Positions, Which Lead to Undermining Human Rights

Human rights defenders have observed that some members of the opposition share numerous other political positions, in addition to opposition to the convention, that are antithetical to the values of these HRDs. From the perspective of an HRD, some members of the opposition share of the following viewpoints or positions which result in the following exclusive politics:

-
- against the rights of LGBTI persons, including legalization of same-sex relations
 - for discrimination against LGBTI people in all areas of society and even their extinction
 - for LGBTI-free zones
 - for sexual orientation correction programs
 - against any right to adoption by LGBTI parents
 - against SRR
 - against abortion
 - for forcing women to give birth under all circumstances, even in life-threatening situations
 - for the prosecution and punishment of women having an abortion and of those who assist them in doing so
 - against contraception, even in countries and regions with high HIV risk
 - against sexuality before and in marriage except for purposes of reproduction (sexuality is depicted as something base and only for reproduction)
 - against comprehensive sex education in school
 - against sexual freedom
 - against public school systems and education for all
 - for parents to hold the primary right to educate their children and home schooling
 - against divorce
 - against *de jure* and *de facto* gender equality between women and men
 - against women's empowerment
 - against the rule of law and independent media
 - against EU collective agreements and minimum wages
 - against EU integration
 - for the culturalization of violence
 - against the right of refugees to seek asylum
 - against legalization of undocumented immigrants
 - for the exploitation of immigrants as a cheap workforce
 - for xenophobia and blaming immigrants for societal problems
 - for agitation and instilling hate and fear
 - against equality
 - for the exploitation of certain groups of people
 - for the right to carry and sell weapons
 - against climate goals¹⁵
-

Research and interviews reveal that “gender ideology” propaganda is one of the primary factors fueling the backlash to the Istanbul Convention.¹⁶ The “gender ideology” fiction is an umbrella concept used to oppose women’s equality, LGTBI rights, and SRR. The opposition seeks to

brand different human rights initiatives as promoting a threatening “gender ideology” that will destroy traditional values. In Europe,¹⁷ the movement is part of Russia’s broader efforts to undermine and destabilize the CoE, the European Union (EU), and other European institutions.¹⁸ The U.S. religious right has utilized its more than 30 years of experience in organizational tactics and leadership to reinforce the opposition in Europe.¹⁹ The opposition has also benefitted from vast financial support from U.S. and European organizations and religious groups that aim to delegitimize human rights and further their ideological agenda.²⁰

This threat must be recognized for what it is: a transnational, socio-political movement that exploits people’s stereotypes, fears, religious beliefs, concerns over migration, and nationalism. Many in the opposition redirect these sentiments to attack the individual rights and democratic values reflected in the CoE’s human rights and governance treaties, including those that protect the rights of women. In particular, the opposition often uses the well-being of children to foster unfounded hysteria of the harms of “gender ideology” and specific human rights.²¹ The opposition derides the human rights framework as reflecting a “gender ideology” that will undermine the traditional family, erode fundamental cultural values, and erase national identity. For the approximately 151 million women in the 14 reviewed countries where rates of violence against women reach nearly 40 percent of women, the opposition’s distortion of the Istanbul Convention threatens to undermine decades of progress in countering this pervasive human rights violation.

Country	Signed	Ratified
Armenia	✓	
Bulgaria	✓	
Croatia	✓	✓
Czech Republic	✓	
Hungary	✓	
Italy	✓	✓
Latvia	✓	
Lithuania	✓	
Moldova	✓	✓
Poland	✓	✓
Romania	✓	✓
Slovakia	✓	
Turkey	✗	✗
Ukraine	✓	

The discourse against the Istanbul Convention is similar in all reviewed countries. These countries initially embraced the treaty on some level: all 14 countries signed the Istanbul Convention, and Turkey’s vote to ratify was the Turkish Parliament’s only unanimous vote in all of 2012.²² Yet, the speed with which the opposition gained political and public influence to sway opinion is reflected in several developments, including: the stalled ratification processes in Ukraine, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Moldova, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Armenia, and the Czech Republic; the resistance to full implementation of the convention in Croatia, Romania, and Italy; Poland’s announced intention to withdraw from the treaty, and; President Erdoğan’s March decree withdrawing from the convention.²³ Even policymakers who previously supported the convention are reluctant to publicly mention it or support ratification; some have

referred to it as “political suicide.”²⁴ Poland has begun to directly lobby its neighbors to reject the Istanbul Convention and adopt the Convention on the Rights of the Family, an alternative document produced by the opposition that is not formally recognized by inter-governmental bodies as a legitimate treaty.²⁵

In Appendix A we provide our assessment of the 14 reviewed countries’ progress toward ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the risk of withdrawal from the treaty, divided into green, yellow, orange, and red tiers. A brief summary follows. It does not address countries’ implementation of the treaty, which is beyond the scope of this report.

Progress Toward Ratification Scorecard Summary

Green Tier

- Italy
- Romania

- Have ratified the convention and there is no significant momentum for withdrawal

Yellow Tier

- Armenia
- Latvia

- A court or advisory body has opined that the convention does not contravene the country’s constitution, but nonetheless the convention remains unratified

Orange Tier

- Croatia
- Czech Republic
- Lithuania
- Ukraine
- Moldova

- Have ratified the convention, but the opposition remains strong
- Have signed but not ratified the convention, with opposition actively fostering resistance
- There is a political stalemate preventing ratification, or the government in power has failed to follow its own procedures to transmit the convention to parliament for ratification

Red Tier

- Bulgaria
- Hungary
- Poland
- Slovakia
- Turkey

- Have issued a decree withdrawing from the convention, have commenced internal domestic processes to withdraw from the convention, or ratification has been found to be contrary to the country’s constitution
- Have a controlling head of state strongly opposed to the convention
- Had one of more votes against ratification in parliament
- Have a parliament controlled by anti-convention politicians and current public opinion does not appear to support ratification

The term “backlash” in this report encompasses the array of tactics individuals and groups use to undermine support for the Istanbul Convention and distort its true purpose and meaning. Their actions tend to fall within three categories: 1) defending the “traditional” family, defined as the lifelong union of a biological male husband and a biological female wife whose goal is procreation; 2) generating fear and hysteria about the convention’s requirements; and 3) stoking nationalist sentiments. Some opponents’ arguments against the Istanbul Convention include false or misleading messages about one or more of these three pillars. The opposition often advocates for traditional roles for men and women, including those that: subvert women’s rights in the name of the family unit; promote a vision of humanity’s extinction through demographic decline; aggressively oppose rights for LGBTI individuals, minorities, and migrants; spread “gender ideology” concepts to demonize gender equality; and exploit fear about western influences that threaten national sovereignty. The opposition also often asserts that a particular country already protects women from violence and therefore, no international treaty is needed.

The opposition uses highly effective tools to promote its messages. The opposition has built well-funded and highly organized, interlocking international networks, beginning in the 1990s with the first World Congress of Families.²⁶ The far right, however, tends to keep its funding sources and supporters hidden behind layers of actors and organizations.²⁷ Some opposition actors have built political movements and parties around their concepts of traditional family and religious values, including the current governing parties in Poland (PiS) and Hungary (Fidesz). These opposition actors have hijacked the language and tools of international human rights to legitimize restrictions on human rights, including those of women. Other opposition organizations, such as the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) and Ordo Iuris,²⁸ use law and litigation to achieve social, political, and other goals. Some in the opposition repeat the same messages across multiple media and public platforms to an audience that may be unfamiliar with the Istanbul Convention or learning about it for the first time. As part of its efforts, the opposition raises constitutional challenges to the legitimacy of the Istanbul Convention in many countries. For example, in 2018, Bulgaria’s Constitutional Court declared ratification of the convention unconstitutional based on a faulty determination that it would require recognition of “gender” as a social construct, which the Istanbul Convention does not.²⁹

The opposition also tends to paint supporters of the convention as enemies of the family intent on displacing parents as the primary educators of their children. The opposition claims the Istanbul Convention’s mandate on teaching gender equality and non-stereotyped gender roles means parents will no longer be able to instruct children on homosexuality and sexual promiscuity. They argue that the convention will ignore the rights of men and displace them as the heads of their families. The opposition leverages conservative beliefs and institutions, including the Catholic and Orthodox Churches in some countries, to spread fear through social

and other media about the Istanbul Convention's impact on traditional religious, social, and cultural values. For example, one widespread falsehood is that the convention will require recognition of a "third" sex, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage. It should be noted, however, that organized religion plays different roles in different countries; in some places, religious bodies are the opposition while in others, the Church is a strong ally for human rights.³⁰ Finally, the opposition is actively lobbying against EU accession to the Istanbul Convention on the basis that it "imposes gender ideology on the Member States."³¹

As illustrated by the so-called "Convention on the Rights of the Family" drafted by Poland's *Ordo Iuris*, and the Declaration Pro Familia signed by the Visegrad Four states, the opposition seeks to elevate the "rights of the family" over individual human rights.³² This formula undermines not only the human rights of women and children to live free from violence, but also the rights of all individuals, including men, that are essential to a functioning democracy. This vision, directly contrary to the history, spirit, and requirements of the Istanbul Convention, would effectively re-privatize violence within the family, a concept already embodied by Russia's decriminalization of domestic violence.³³ Prohibitions against violence against women would be replaced by the imperative to keep the traditional family—along with traditional, patriarchal household roles—together at all costs. For example, the Istanbul Convention obliges state parties to promote the economic independence of victims of violence. The opposition's platform, however, champions women's primary roles as child bearers and caretakers within the home.

In the face of this tremendous backlash, civil society plays a crucial role in countering the opposition's rhetoric and tactics. According to one Austrian HRD, "We must not forget we live in the most free and safe time, and that is why we are facing this big backlash—because this is their last stand. We must remember there is a crack in everything, and that is where the light comes in, and we must be that light."³⁴

Civil society organizations that defend human rights expressed near unanimous dismay at the force and strength of the backlash to the Istanbul Convention. Some HRDs were taken by surprise, explaining how they initially found the opposition arguments against the convention so ludicrous, they failed to take them seriously.³⁵ This meant that civil society was unprepared for the rapid acceleration of well-funded and well-executed attacks on the convention and the waning support for ratification among the public and government. In some countries, the backlash has completely halted discussion of ratification, making it difficult for civil society to mount campaigns in support of the treaty, particularly where opposition attacks on women's NGOs are dangerous. HRDs acknowledge that the Istanbul Convention is an abstract concept for many people, making it easy for the opposition to spread misinformation and fear about its objectives.

The working space for civil society, especially women’s rights NGOs, is shrinking—a phenomenon recognized by the EU, which has undertaken initiatives to confront this development.³⁶ Conditions that restrict the space for NGOs to work include: limiting the ability of human rights NGOs to receive international funding; enacting burdensome registration or reporting requirements; intimidation and violent attacks against HRDs; the invasion of spaces normally reserved for human rights NGOs by private interest groups, lobbyists and Government Operated NGOs (GONGOs); defunding women’s NGOs; and self-censorship by civil society due to fear of persecution and lawsuits.³⁷

Consistent with efforts to shrink civil society space, some in the opposition commonly demonize supporters of the Istanbul Convention.³⁸ For example, President Erdoğan of Turkey labels supporters as “marginal women,”³⁹ “anti-Turkish,” and “anti-Islam.”⁴⁰ Likewise, in Armenia, supporters of the convention are vilified as “enemies of the country.”⁴¹ Spain’s HazteOir launched a social media campaign with the hashtag “#StopFeminazis.”⁴² In practice, this opposition strategy encourages hate speech, violence, harassment, and the defunding of NGOs that support women’s and human rights.⁴³

Despite these challenges, human rights NGOs have fought back and mounted successful campaigns engaging thousands of women in support of the Istanbul Convention. Their efforts to promote the Istanbul Convention and educate the public and policymakers about violence against women have led to improvements in law and policy and, in some cases, enhanced public understanding about the issue. Civil society movements have organized mass demonstrations against government actions that would restrict or suppress women’s rights and fundamental freedoms, including in Poland and Turkey.⁴⁴

Many organizations continue to advocate for ratification before their Parliaments and raise the importance of the Istanbul Convention in any discussion of the state response to violence against women—whether with police, prosecutors, or ministers. Civil society has applied important lessons to build public and political support for ratification of the Istanbul Convention. This report describes the effective and often innovative strategies undertaken by civil society, including: increasing visibility in creative ways; focusing on the recruitment and training of new activists and supporters; identifying unusual or unconventional allies, such as smaller, sympathetic groups within the opposition; tapping into diaspora networks for funding and political leverage; exploring alternative means within the political landscape, including implementation of the treaty provisions without ratification; tailoring messages and campaigns to specific audiences, and; leveraging all possible resources, such as volunteers and influencers with broad reach.

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- ¹ Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), “Step up for Everyone: 10 Years of the Istanbul Convention,” *WAVE* (Accessed June 27, 2021), <https://www.wave-stepup.org/10-years-of-the-istanbulconvention/>.
- ² Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence,” CETS No. 210 (May 11, 2011 (opened for signature), Aug. 1, 2014 (entry into force)), <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>.
- ³ Council of Europe, “About - Historical Background to the Istanbul Convention,” *Council of Europe* (Accessed June 21, 2021), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/historical-background>.
- ⁴ Council of Europe, “About - Historical Background to the Istanbul Convention.”
- ⁵ Article 3(a), Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.”
- ⁶ *Id.* at Article 5.
- ⁷ Thirty-five ratifications include Moldova whose Parliament ratified the convention on October 14, 2021. Council of Europe, “Chart of Signatures and Ratifications of Treaty 210,” *Council of Europe* (Accessed Nov. 22, 2021), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210/signatures?module=signatures-by-treaty&treatynum=210>; Council of Europe, “PACE Rapporteurs Congratulate the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova for Adopting the Ratification Law on the Istanbul Convention,” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/chisinau/-/pace-rapporteurs-congratulate-the-parliament-of-the-republic-of-moldova-for-adopting-the-ratification-law-on-the-istanbul-convention>.
- ⁸ “Gender ideology” is a fiction that depicts the goals of the women’s rights, LGBTI rights, and sexual and reproductive rights (SRR) movements as a threat to the traditional family and Christian social values. Graeme Reid, “Breaking the Buzzword: Fighting the ‘Gender Ideology’ Myth,” (Dec. 10 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/10/breaking-buzzword-fighting-gender-ideology-myth#>.
- ⁹ See generally Elizabeth Corredor, “Unpacking ‘Gender Ideology’ and the Global Right’s Antigender Countermovement,” *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44 (Feb. 19, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1086/701171>, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/701171>; Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, “Disentangling and Locating the ‘Global Right:’ Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe,” *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 3 (Apr. 27, 2018), <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/1557>; Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, and Suzanna Danuta Walters, “Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right,” *Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, 3 (Spring 2019), University of Chicago Press, <http://signsjournal.org/gender-and-the-rise-of-the-global-right-spring-2019-vol-44-no-3/>; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331447010_Introduction_Gender_and_the_Rise_of_the_Global_Right.
- ¹⁰ See Section “Ratification Status in Reviewed Countries” on pages 17-22 discussing the convention’s status in each of the 14 reviewed countries.
- ¹¹ See Section “Disparage and Intimidate Opponents” on pages 94-95 discussing attacks on women’s HRDs; see also Human Rights Watch, “Poland: Escalating Threats to Women Activists,” *Human Rights Watch* (Mar. 31, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/31/poland-escalating-threats-women-activists>.
- ¹² “Violence against Women ‘Most Shameful,’ Pervasive Human Rights Violation, Says Secretary-General in Remarks on International Women’s Day,” ed. United Nations SG/SM/6919 and WOM/1113 (Mar. 8, 1999), <https://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990308.sgsm6919.html>.
- ¹³ Article 3(a), Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.”
- ¹⁴ *Id.* at Article 5.
- ¹⁵ Personal Communication from Austrian HRD to The Advocates for Human Rights, via email, May 28, 2021 (on file with authors).
- ¹⁶ See, e.g., Kuhar and Paternotte, “Disentangling and Locating the ‘Global Right:’ Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe;” Corredor, “Unpacking ‘Gender Ideology’ and the Global Right’s Antigender Countermovement;” Graff, Kapur, and Walters, “Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right.”

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- ¹⁷ The authors recognize Turkey's geographical connection to both Europe and Asia. In this report, the term "Europe" is used to include the reviewed countries other than Turkey. While the opposition's false narratives opposing the convention are similar across the reviewed countries, the forces arrayed against the convention in Europe and Turkey may diverge somewhat. In Turkey, the opposition arises from the populist, anti-women's equality politics of Turkish President Erdoğan and his AK Party, conservative religious pressure from fundamentalist groups, an appeal to Turkish nationalism (traditional Turkish values and the Turkish family), and anti-LGBTI, anti-EU, and anti-West sentiments. Elif Gözdasoglu Küçükalioglu, "Framing Gender-Based Violence in Turkey," *Les Cahiers du CEDREF* 22 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/cedref/1138>.
- ¹⁸ Andrew S. Weiss, "With Friends Like These: The Kremlin's Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria," *The Carnegie Endowment for Peace* (Feb. 27, 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/02/27/with-friends-like-these-kremlin-s-far-right-and-populist-connections-in-italy-and-austria-pub-81100>; Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money," *Institute of Modern Russia* (Nov. 2014), https://imrussia.org/media/pdf/Research/Michael_Weiss_and_Peter_Pomerantsev__The_Menace_of_Unreality.pdf. See also, United States Senate, "Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security: A Minority Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Committee on Foreign Relations," (Jan. 10, 2018), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ Claudia Ciobanu, "New World Order: The 'Natural Family' Franchise Goes Global," *Balkan Insight* (Nov. 21, 2018), <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/21/new-world-order-the-natural-family-franchise-goes-global-11-05-2018/>; María Angélica Peñas Defago, José Manuel Morán Faúndes, and Juan Marco Vaggione, "Religious Conservatism on the Global Stage: Threats and Challenges for LGBTI Rights," *Global Philanthropy Project* (Nov. 2018), <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2018/11/04/religious-conservatism-on-the-global-stage-threats-and-challenges-for-lgbti-rights/>. The World Congress of Families included sessions on leadership and organizing, led by the U.S. lawfare organization, Alliance Defending Freedom. See, e.g., sessions at the World Congress of Families in 2007 in Warsaw, Poland. World Congress of Families, "Program for the IV World Congress of Families: The Natural Family - Springtime for Europe and the World Warsaw, Poland May 11-13, 2007," *World Congress of Families Website Created for the Warsaw Congress* (2007), <https://www.worldcongress.pl/wstep.php>. Training for the opposition is now conducted in Europe. "Training Leaders for a Better Europe: The European Advocacy Academy," *European Dignity Watch* (Dec. 14, 2017), <http://www.europeandignitywatch.org/training-leaders-for-a-better-europe-the-european-advocacy-academy/>.
- ²⁰ Claire Provost and Adam Ramsay, "Revealed: Trump-Linked US Christian 'Fundamentalists' Pour Millions of 'Dark Money' into Europe, Boosting the Far Right," *OpenDemocracy* (Mar. 27, 2019), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-trump-linked-us-christian-fundamentalists-pour-millions-of-dark-money-into-europe-boosting-the-far-right/>; Neil Datta, "Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018," *European Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights* (June 2021), <https://www.epfweb.org/node/837>. See Section "Funding" on pages 121- 126 for a discussion of the opposition's resources.
- ²¹ See generally Juliana Martinez, Angela Duarte, and Maria Juliana Rojas of Sentiido Colombia, "Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights," *Elevate Children Funders Group and Global Philanthropy Project*, (Mar. 2021), <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2021/03/24/manufacturing-moral-panic/>.
- ²² "The Istanbul Convention Was the Common Idea of All 4 Parties: Statement of Aylin Nazliaka, Deputy of the Turkish Political Party CHP," *BIA News Center* (July 22, 2020), <https://bianet.org/kadin/toplumsal-cinsiyet/227861-istanbul-sozlesmesi-4-partinin-de-ortak-fikriydi>.
- ²³ See Section "Ratification Status in Reviewed Countries" on pages 17-22 discussing the convention's status in each of the 14 reviewed countries.
- ²⁴ Slovakia Interview 2.
- ²⁵ Claudia Ciobanu, "Poland Begins Push in Region to Replace Istanbul Convention with 'Family Rights' Treaty," *Balkan Insight* (Oct. 6, 2020), <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/06/family-rights-treaty/>; Claudia Ciobanu, "Poland's

Replacement for Istanbul Convention Would Ban Abortion and Gay Marriage,” *Balkan Insight* (Mar. 15, 2021), <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/15/polands-replacement-for-istanbul-convention-would-ban-abortion-and-gay-marriage/>; “Poland Invites Slovenia to Withdraw from Convention Aimed at Preventing Violence against Women,” *Total Slovenia News* (Sept. 2, 2020), <https://www.total-slovenia-news.com/politics/6881-poland-invites-slovenia-to-withdraw-from-convention-aimed-at-preventing-violence-against-women>.

²⁶ See pages 34-36 for a description of the World Congress of Families. The first World Congress of Families was in 1997. Rita J. Trimble, “Conceiving a ‘Natural Family’ Order: The World Congress of Families and Transnational Conservative Christian Politics,” *OHIOLink Electronic Theses & Dissertations Center*, 2014, Doctor of Philosophy, Ohio State University, Comparative Studies (2014), 64, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=osu1388411714. Other networks in Europe to note are Agenda Europe and organizations, such as Ordo Iuris, that have ties to Tradition, Family and Property. Neil Datta, “‘Agenda Europe’: An Extremist Christian Network in the Heart of Europe,” *HEINRICH-BÖLL-STIFTUNG* (Apr. 29, 2019), <https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2019/04/29/agenda-europe-extremist-christian-network-heart-europe>; Neil Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” *European Parliamentary Forum on Population & Development* (Apr. 2018), https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/rtno_epf_book_lores.pdf; Neil Datta, “Modern-Day Crusaders in Europe. Tradition, Family and Property: Analysis of a Transnational, Ultra-Conservative, Catholic-Inspired Influence Network,” *European Parliamentary Forum on Population & Development* (June 2020), https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Modern%20Day%20Crusaders%20in%20Europe%20-%20TFP%20Report_1.pdf.

²⁷ See Section “Funding” on pages 121-126.

²⁸ See Section “Waging Lawfare” on pages 107-116 for more information on this tactic and lawfare organizations.

²⁹ See Section “Language Confusion” on pages 70-71 for a discussion of the complications generated by differing and sometimes misleading translations of the words “sex” and “gender” in other languages, and Section “Constitutional Challenges” on pages 109-113.

³⁰ In the U.S., the church has been a strong ally for human rights defenders on immigration reform and against the death penalty. In addition, there are actors within the Catholic Church who are strong voices for human rights, such as Nuns on the Bus, a group of Catholic sisters who are activists and value women’s leadership, welcome the members of the LGBTI community, and work to be racially inclusive. For more information see NETWORK Advocates for Justice Inspired by Catholic Sisters, “Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice,” *NETWORK LOBBY* (2021), <https://networklobby.org/>.

³¹ See page 113-114 discussing the status of the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention and the opposition’s campaign to prevent EU accession to the Istanbul Convention called “Stop Gender, Stand for the Family,” led by Ordo Iuris.

³² The Visegrad Four states include Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

³³ Olga Semukhina, “The Decriminalization of Domestic Violence in Russia,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University 28, no. 1 (2020), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/747823>; Library of Congress, “Russia: Decriminalization of Domestic Violence,” Library of Congress Law (2021). For a discussion of subsequent failed legislative efforts to improve Russia’s domestic violence laws, see Alexey Yurtaev, “Inside the Fight over Russia’s Domestic Violence Law,” *OpenDemocracy* (Feb. 17, 2020), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-domestic-violence-law/>.

³⁴ “Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting,” (Zagreb, Croatia, July 8-10 2019).

³⁵ See, e.g., Armenia Interview 2; Bulgaria Interview 7; Lidia Balogh, “The Ratification Status of the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention among EU Member States,” *mtakjiti- Magyar Tudományos Akadémia / Hungarian Academy of Sciences MTA Law Working Papers 2020/7* (2020), 12, 17, http://real.mtak.hu/122887/1/2020_7_Balogh.pdf.

³⁶ European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies Policy Department, “Shrinking Space for Civil Society: The EU Response,” *European Union EP/EXPO/B/COMMITTEE/FWC/2013-08/Lot8/12* (Apr. 2017), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO_STU\(2017\)578039_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO_STU(2017)578039_EN.pdf).

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- ³⁷ Christina Wassholm, “Suffocating the Movement - Shrinking Space for Women’s Rights,” *Kvinna Kvinna* (2018), 11-13, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/kvinna-till-kvinna-suffocating-the-movement-report-eng-2018.pdf>.
- ³⁸ Agenda Europe, a secretive opposition organization, advocates maligning proponents of ratification as one of its top strategies. Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 17.
- ³⁹ “Turkey’s Erdoğan Says Women Who Reject Motherhood ‘Incomplete,’” *BBC News* (June 5, 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36456878>; Küçükalioglu, “Framing Gender-Based Violence in Turkey.”
- ⁴⁰ President Erdoğan stated that feminists have “no relation to our religion and our civilization.” Deniz Kandiyoti, “The Gender Wars in Turkey: A Litmus Test of Democracy?,” *openDemocracy* (Mar. 30, 2015), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/gender-wars-in-turkey-litmus-test-of-democracy/>; Küçükalioglu, “Framing Gender-Based Violence in Turkey.”
- ⁴¹ Armenia Interview 1.
- ⁴² Ellen Rivera, “Unraveling the Anti-Choice Supergroup Agenda Europe in Spain. A Case Study of Citizengo and Hazteoir,” George Washington University, Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Occasional Papers Transnational History of the Far Right (Oct. 4, 2019), 9 <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/b/3076/files/2019/10/IERES-papers-4-Oct-2019.pdf>.
- ⁴³ See, e.g., Bulgaria Interviews 2, 9; Croatia Interview 11; Agnieszka Bielecka, “Poland No Friend to Women: Government Refuses to Fund Women’s Support Groups,” *Human Rights Watch* (Dec. 3, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/03/poland-no-friend-women>; Paweł Marczewski, “Freedom to Exclude: Conservative CSOs in Law and Justice Poland,” *Carnegie Europe* (Oct. 4, 2018), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/10/04/freedom-to-exclude-conservative-csos-in-law-and-justice-poland-pub-77377>; “All Downhill from Here: The Rapid Degradation of the Rule of Law in Poland: What It Means for Women’s Sexual and Reproductive Rights, and LGBT+ Persons’ Rights,” *FIDH* (Jan. 21, 2018), https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/pologne_fidh_web_v4.pdf. After her visit to Moldova in 2020, the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern regarding hate speech from political candidates and community leaders targeting women and LGBTI persons. The commissioner stated, “The Moldovan authorities must take ownership and responsibility in fighting hate speech and translate their commitment into a visible strategy.” Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, “Moldova Should Ratify the Istanbul Convention, Improve Its Response to Hate Speech,” *Council of Europe Website, News* (June 25, 2020), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/moldova-should-ratify-the-istanbul-convention-improve-its-response-to-hate>.
- ⁴⁴ See, e.g., Hilary Margolis, “In a Year of Pandemic and Pain, Women Fight Back,” *openDemocracy* (Nov. 27, 2020), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/year-pandemic-and-pain-women-fight-back-mass-protests/>; Paweł Szelegieniec, “Behind the ‘Black Protests:’ The Struggle for Abortion Rights in Poland,” *Monthly Review (New York 1949)* 70, no. 1 (2018), https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-070-01-2018-05_5; Amanda Taub, “In Poland, Protests over Abortion Ban Could Revolutionize Politics,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 7, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/07/world/europe/poland-abortion-protests.html>; Esra Yalcinalp, “Turkey Erdoğan: Women Rise up over Withdrawal from Istanbul Convention,” *BBC News* (Mar. 26, 2021), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56516462>; “Turkey: Thousands Protest Exit from Domestic Violence Treaty,” *DW* (Mar. 27, 2021), <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-thousands-protest-exit-from-domestic-violence-treaty/a-57027554>.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The Advocates relied on extensive research, including print and digital media, government documents, reports from NGOs (also referred to as civil society organizations or CSOs), academic literature, a 2019 convening of 31 HRDs from 18 countries,⁴⁵ 94 qualitative interviews conducted over a period of approximately 24 months, and periodic meetings of these HRDs. Civil society NGOs working on women’s and human rights or providing legal or other services to women victims of violence represented approximately 78 percent of the interviews.⁴⁶ In Croatia, The Advocates carried out a pilot documentation project, conducting 44 interviews with individuals across a broad cross-section of sectors, including Members of Parliament (MPs), national and local government officials, political party members, members of the clergy or theologians, medical doctors, journalists, and representatives from organizations supporting the Istanbul Convention. This report focuses on 14 countries: Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

In this report, interviewees are not identified by name. Instead, they are identified by country, the number of the interview as coded by the authors, and where appropriate, by occupation. Although the Istanbul Convention does not deal with LGBTI rights, the authors interviewed several LGBTI organizations because many in the opposition incorrectly assert, *inter alia*, that the Istanbul Convention authorizes a third sex, requires recognition of same sex marriage, and will teach boys to become girls.

Of note, this report frequently references the “traditional family.” The authors use “traditional family” in the way that family is defined by the opposition—i.e., a biological male husband, a biological female wife, and their children. This use is only for purposes of this report and does not reflect the authors’ position on what constitutes a family.

Table A: Reviewed Countries and Categories of Interviewee

Country	National Level Gov't Official, Members of the European Parliament	Political Party Official	City or County Level Gov't Official	Journalist	Clergy, Theologian	Medical Doctor	NGOs Civil Society, HRDs, Women's Rights/LGBTI Organizations	Funding Source	Attorney with expertise in human rights, NGOs	Totals
Armenia							3			3
Austria							2			2
Belarus							1			1
Belgium							1			1
Bulgaria							7	1	1	9
Croatia	6	1	2	6	4	2	20		3	44
Czech Republic							3			3
Hungary							2			2
Italy							1			1
Latvia							2			2
Lithuania							1			1
Moldova							3		1	4
Poland							3		1	4
Romania							3			3
Russia							1		1	2
Slovakia	1								1	2
Turkey							2			2
Ukraine							6		1	7
Funding Source								1		1
Totals	7	1	2	6	4	2	61	2	9	94

⁴⁵ In this report, interviewees are not identified by name. Instead, they are identified by country, the number of the interview as coded by the authors, and where appropriate, by occupation.

⁴⁶ Although the Istanbul Convention does not deal with LGBTI rights, the authors interviewed several LGBTI organizations because many in the opposition incorrectly assert, *inter alia*, that the Istanbul Convention authorizes a third sex, requires recognition of same sex marriage, and will teach boys to become girls.

ISTANBUL CONVENTION OVERVIEW

The Istanbul Convention is the fourth human rights convention to deal with discrimination and violence against women, following the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979),⁴⁸ the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Belém do Pará) (1994),⁴⁹ and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) (2003).⁵⁰ Its drafting began in 2008, 40 years after CEDAW, 15 years after Belém do Pará, 6 years after the Maputo Protocol, and 14 years after the United Nation’s (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.⁵¹

It leverages four decades of monitoring states’ efforts to implement previous treaties.⁵² It takes into account the CoE’s Committee of Ministers Recommendation of 2002, Rec (2002)5 on protection of violence against women.⁵³

The Istanbul Convention recognizes that violence targeted toward women is both a human rights violation and a form of discrimination.⁵⁴ The treaty aims to protect the rights of women and girls and applies to all forms of violence, including domestic violence, which affect women disproportionately. It does, however, encourage states to apply its protection and services to all victims of domestic violence.⁵⁵ It also states that the convention shall apply equally in times of peace and in situations of armed conflicts.⁵⁶

The Istanbul Convention’s stated purposes are unambiguous:

- a. protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence;
- b. contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women;
- c. design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence;
- d. promote international co-operation with a view to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence; and

“THERE IS VERY MUCH THE NEED TO DEMYSTIFY, TO REALLY COMBAT THE MYTHS AROUND THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION, AND TO REALLY BRING IT BACK TO WHAT IT IS: AN AMAZING INSTRUMENT TO FIGHT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS.”

Human Rights Defender⁴⁷

- e. provide support and assistance to organizations and law enforcement agencies to co-operate effectively in order to adopt an integrated approach to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence.⁵⁷

As its plain wording and legislative history make clear, the scope of the treaty is aimed at women. The convention is directed “mostly” at women because the majority of victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence are women and girls and because the forms of prohibited violence are those that only women experience, e.g., female genital mutilation, or that women suffer more than men, e.g., sexual violence and rape.⁵⁸ The CoE acknowledges that men may also be victims of violence and encourages States Parties to protect all victims under the convention.⁵⁹ Specifically, it gives states discretion in deciding whether to apply the Istanbul Convention to others, including men, children, and elderly victims of violence.⁶⁰

Upon ratification, a state becomes a party to the Istanbul Convention and is obligated to implement it at the national level.⁶¹ This requires: (1) coordinating any existing or new national policies and measures to combat violence against women; (2) implementing such measures; and (3) ensuring the monitoring and evaluation of such measures at a national level to assess any positive and negative outcomes.⁶² States Parties are required to criminalize specific forms of violence against women, including stalking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and forced abortion and sterilization, and exclude claims of “honor” as a defense to committing a crime against a woman.⁶³ States Parties must implement the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, make the necessary legislative changes, and provide the necessary financial resources to implement the treaty’s requirements, including providing services to victims and a mechanism for data collection.⁶⁴

Like other human rights treaties, the Istanbul Convention includes a monitoring mechanism, a group of experts collectively referred to as GREVIO. GREVIO periodically assesses each ratifying state’s implementation of its treaty obligations, and its monitoring processes allow for both member state and civil society input in a State Party’s evaluation.⁶⁵

RATIFICATION STATUS IN REVIEWED COUNTRIES

All 14 countries reviewed for the purposes of this report have signed the Istanbul Convention. Six countries, Moldova (2021), Croatia (2018), Romania (2016), Italy (2013), Poland (2013), and Turkey (2012), have ratified it.⁶⁶ Ratification is not, however, a guarantee of permanent commitment. In July 2020, Poland took the extraordinary step of initiating a process for withdrawal⁶⁷ and has encouraged the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia to support its proposed alternative to the Istanbul Convention.⁶⁸ Further, on March 19, 2021, Turkey’s President Erdoğan signed a decree and published it, without explanation, on March 20, 2021, to withdraw Turkey from the convention, effective July 1, 2021.⁶⁹ The chart on the right shows at a glance the signing and ratification status of the convention in each of the reviewed countries. Table B reflects the political complexity that accompanies the issue of ratification status in several of the reviewed countries. See also Appendix A.

Country	Signed	Ratified
Armenia	✓	
Bulgaria	✓	
Croatia	✓	✓
Czech Republic	✓	
Hungary	✓	
Italy	✓	✓
Latvia	✓	
Lithuania	✓	
Moldova	✓	✓
Poland	✓	✓
Romania	✓	✓
Slovakia	✓	
Turkey	✗	✗
Ukraine	✓	

Table B: Status of the Istanbul Convention by Reviewed Country

Country	Date	Action ⁷⁰			
		Signing	Ratification	Entry into Force	Other Action
Armenia	January 18, 2018	✓			
	October 11-12, 2019	✓			European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) decision finding the Istanbul Convention does not violate Armenia’s Constitution. ⁷¹
Bulgaria	April 12, 2016	✓			
	July 27, 2018				Bulgaria’s Constitutional Court declares the Istanbul Convention unconstitutional. ⁷²

Country	Date	Action ⁷⁰			
		Signing	Ratification	Entry into Force	Other Action
Croatia	January 22, 2013	✓			
	June 12, 2018		✓		
	October 1, 2018			✓	
Czech Republic	May 2, 2016	✓			
	July 27, 2020				After Poland announces its intentions to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, the convention is withdrawn from the Czech Parliament, which was due to consider its ratification. ⁷³
Hungary	April 14, 2014	✓			
	May 5, 2020				The Hungarian Parliament votes against ratification. ⁷⁴
	January 25, 2021				At the European Parliament, Hungary's ruling Fidesz-KDNP party representatives refuse to vote in favor of a gender equality report because it recommends ratification of the convention and, according to Fidesz-KDNP, therefore infringes on Hungary's sovereignty. ⁷⁵
Italy	September 27, 2012	✓			
	October 10, 2013		✓		
	August 14, 2014			✓	
Latvia	May 18, 2016	✓			
	August 4, 2020				Latvia's Constitutional Court agrees to consider constitutionality of the convention. ⁷⁶
	June 4, 2021				The Constitutional Court finds the Istanbul Convention is fully compatible with the Latvian Constitution and rejects all arguments against it. ⁷⁷
Lithuania	June 7, 2013	✓			
	June 7, 2018				Former President Dalia Grybauskaitė submits the Istanbul Convention to the Lithuanian Parliament for ratification. ⁷⁸

Country	Date	Action ⁷⁰			
		Signing	Ratification	Entry into Force	Other Action
	October 31, 2019				The Lithuanian representative to CEDAW states there is “no political will to ratify” the convention. ⁷⁹
	Spring, 2021				It appeared that ratification of the convention would be added to Parliament’s agenda for the spring of 2021. Due to public resistance to the convention, where many expressed dismay over the intensity and vitriol surrounding the debate, ⁸⁰ the convention’s ratification ultimately was not included in Parliament’s spring 2021 legislative agenda. ⁸¹
Moldova	January 6, 2017	✓			
	March 3, 2020				Former President Dodon sends the convention to the Moldovan Parliament a week before a state of emergency is declared, apparently in response to urging from the EU. ⁸² But he simultaneously advised his Socialist Party to vote against ratification. ⁸³ Parliament, however, has not yet considered ratification of the convention.
	July 11, 2021				Dodon lost the election in November 2020 to pro-EU, anti-corruption candidate Maia Sandu. ⁸⁴ Nevertheless, it was not until the July 11, 2021 parliamentary elections gave Sandu’s party and supporters a major victory that her anti-corruption, EU agenda could progress. ⁸⁵ These changes may eventually open space for consideration of ratification. ⁸⁶
	October 14, 2021		As of December 2021, CoE has not yet recorded formal treaty ratification.		The Moldovan Parliament approves ratification with 54 votes from the Action and Solidarity Party. Following approval, the Metropolitan Church of Chişinău makes a statement opposing ratification, stating the convention “destroys Christian values and traditions.” ⁸⁷
Poland	December 18, 2012	✓			
	April 27, 2015		✓		
	August 2, 2015			✓	
	July 25, 2020				Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro announces Poland’s

Country	Date	Action ⁷⁰			
		Signing	Ratification	Entry into Force	Other Action
					intention to withdraw from the convention. ⁸⁸
	July 30, 2020				Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announces that he is referring the Istanbul Convention to the Polish Constitutional Court to determine its constitutionality. ⁸⁹
	August 30, 2020				Ordo iuris gathers enough signatures to register a citizens' initiative, "Yes to Family, No to Gender," with Parliament to compel Parliament to consider a proposed law that: (1) seeks to have Parliament authorize withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, and; (2) demands the Polish authorities present the International Convention on the Rights of the Family at the CoE. ⁹⁰
	August 30, 2020				Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs starts "diplomatic activities for the adoption of an international treaty – the convention protecting the rights of families." ⁹¹
	Late April 2021				Parliament does not reject the proposed law and sends it to the relevant Parliamentary committees for further consideration. ⁹²
Romania	June 27, 2014	✓			
	May 23, 2016		✓		
	September 1, 2016			✓	
Slovakia	May 11, 2011	✓			
	March 29, 2019				The Slovakian Parliament rejects ratification. ⁹³
	November 28, 2019				The Slovakian Parliament rejects ratification for a second time. ⁹⁴
	February 25, 2020				The Slovakian Parliament rejects ratification for a third time. ⁹⁵
Turkey	May 11, 2011	✓			
	March 14, 2012		✓		

Country	Date	Action ⁷⁰			
		Signing	Ratification	Entry into Force	Other Action
	August 1, 2014			✓	
	August 5, 2020				Amid widespread protests, Turkey's ruling party fails to hold a scheduled meeting to consider withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and cancellation of the domestic law on violence against women. ⁹⁶
					Turkey's ruling <i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i> (AKP or AK Party) announces it will no longer seek cancellation of the domestic law on violence against women, but it will continue to study cancellation of ratification of the convention. ⁹⁷
	January 7, 2021				Oğuzhan Asiltürk, Chairman of the right-wing Felicity Party's higher advisory board, reports to the press, "He [Erdoğan] told me in clear terms that [the treaty] would be abandoned." ⁹⁸
	March 19, 2021				President Erdoğan signs a decree, which was made public on March 20, 2021, making Turkey the first country to officially commence withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. ⁹⁹ The withdrawal took effect on July 1, 2021 under the terms of the convention and applicable international treaty law. ¹⁰⁰
Ukraine	November 7, 2011	✓			
	December 7, 2018				The Ukrainian President calls on Parliament to ratify the convention. ¹⁰¹
	May 22, 2020				A coalition of women's rights and other NGOs presents a petition to the Ukrainian President calling for ratification of the convention. ¹⁰²
	June 5, 2020				President Zelensky responds to the petition, stating he will submit the convention to Parliament once he is instructed to do so by the relevant ministries. ¹⁰³
	July 20, 2020				The relevant ministries respond to the NGO petition submitted on May 22, 2020. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs states it is prepared to submit the convention for ratification as soon as the executive branch transmits the relevant documents

Country	Date	Action ⁷⁰			
		Signing	Ratification	Entry into Force	Other Action
					to it. As Human Rights Watch states, “the ball is in President Zelensky’s court.” ¹⁰⁴

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN REVIEWED COUNTRIES

The Istanbul Convention’s aim is to address a significant public health crisis, combat violence against women, and safeguard “core values on which the Council of Europe is based,”¹⁰⁵ especially the fundamental rights to security and life. In 2011, when the convention opened for signature, an estimated one-fifth to one-quarter of women in Europe had experienced physical violence at least once during their adult lives, and more than one-tenth experienced sexual abuse involving use of force. When all types of violence, including stalking, were included, prevalence rose to as high as 45 percent of all women.¹⁰⁶ Violence against women remains pervasive, and the Istanbul Convention remains as important today as it was in 2011.

Spotlight: Turkey

With a 38 percent rate of physical and or sexual violence from intimate partners, Turkey has reported significant increases in femicide.¹⁰⁷ Femicides have increased every year since 2012, the year Turkey ratified the Istanbul Convention.¹⁰⁸ The government, which stopped providing credible statistics on violence against women at the end of 2009,¹⁰⁹ showed through its own numbers that between 2003 and 2010, femicides increased 1,400 percent.¹¹⁰ Three women are killed in Turkey each day.¹¹¹ The lack of reliable statistics is exacerbated when Turkish law enforcement officials sympathize with offenders and blame victims for their assaults.¹¹² Law enforcement routinely does not refer victims to other services nor their cases to prosecutors and courts.¹¹³ Reported incidents of vigilante violence in public places against women by unknown men who “mete out punishment to those women whom they perceive to have transgressed the moral codes in Turkey” are also becoming more frequent. For example, women are assaulted for “wearing shorts, smoking cigarettes, sitting cross-legged in public, engaging in public displays of affection, and exercising in parks.”¹¹⁴ Compared to women living in urban areas, rural women experience even higher rates of intimate partner violence with less ability to report instances of physical and sexual assault or to access resources for victims, which are more readily available in urban areas.¹¹⁵ Women from marginalized groups in Turkey, such as Kurdish women, women living with disabilities, women in conflict zones, incarcerated women, and LGBTI women, are also vulnerable to various forms of violence.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, in March 2021, President Erdoğan announced, by Presidential decree, Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, effective July 1, 2021.¹¹⁷

The 14 reviewed countries have a total population of more than 292 million; approximately 151 million individuals are women.¹¹⁸ Securing reliable, comparable data on violence against women in these countries is challenging.¹¹⁹ Comparable data across the reviewed countries comes from a 2012 survey of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and a 2018 Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) survey.¹²⁰ In the case of Turkey, available 2015 data is more limited as it addresses only physical and sexual violence among intimate partners.¹²¹ Table C depicts the percentage of women experiencing sexual or physical violence in the reviewed countries.

Table C: Prevalence of Sexual/Physical Violence against Women in the Reviewed Countries

Country	Percentage of Women Experiencing Sexual/ Physical Violence	Data Source
Poland	19%	FRA 2014
Croatia	21%	FRA 2014
Ukraine	26%	OSCE 2018
Italy	27%	FRA 2014
Bulgaria	28%	FRA 2014
Hungary	28%	FRA 2014
Romania	30%	FRA 2014
Lithuania	31%	FRA 2014
Czech Republic	32%	FRA 2014
Moldova	34%	OSCE 2018
Slovakia	34%	FRA 2014
Turkey	38%	Hacettepe University
Latvia	39%	FRA 2014
Armenia	no comparable data	

Source: FRA, OSCE and Hacettepe University data.¹²²
Elaboration: Authors

Spotlight: Poland

Women’s rights NGOs claim that the 2014 FRA 19 percent prevalence rate of violence against women is lower than the actual rate¹²³ due to several factors, particularly the low willingness among Polish women to report abuse.¹²⁴ A 2016 study of 541 women showed that 22 percent of women since the age of 15 have experienced rape, 37 percent have experienced some other form of sexual violence, and 87 percent have experienced some form of sexual harassment. Of this group, 91 percent of victims do not report sexual violence to the police.¹²⁵ Despite these alarming rates, Poland has announced it will withdraw from the Istanbul Convention based on the claim, among others, that it already adequately protects women from domestic violence.¹²⁶

The global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the prevalence of violence against women. The UN Secretary General confirmed, “Gender-based violence is a global scourge, and the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating it in all its forms: from domestic violence to sexual abuse, online harassment and increased child marriage.”¹²⁷ The UN Secretary General called upon member states to “redouble our efforts to end gender-based violence during COVID-19 and beyond.”¹²⁸ In Lithuania, where domestic violence is the second most commonly reported crime, police stated that crime rates fell by one-fifth during the lockdown from March 18 to April 6, 2020, but domestic violence rates increased by one-fifth.¹²⁹ By May 11, 2020, Lithuanian police reported femicides more than doubled compared to the same period in the prior year, with the majority being domestic homicides in the home.¹³⁰ In Ukraine, the prosecutor’s office announced that incidents of violence against women had almost doubled from 15,000 in 2019 to 27,000 in 2020.¹³¹ In Slovakia, some estimate that calls from women suffering violence quadrupled during the pandemic.¹³²

EUROPEAN UNION RATIFICATION STATUS

Ten of the fourteen reviewed countries are members of the EU, namely: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.¹³³ Turkey has been recognized for accession.¹³⁴ The EU and the CoE share broadly the same fundamental values: human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.¹³⁵ The EU has also undertaken a number of measures to combat violence against women.¹³⁶ According to the CoE website, the EU “refers to those same European values as a key element of its deeper political and economic integration processes. It often builds upon CoE standards when drawing up legal instruments and agreements which apply to its 28 [sic] member states.”¹³⁷

In line with this commitment, the European Commission proposed EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention in May 2016. The European Commission issued a formal Roadmap

Initiative for EU Accession to the Istanbul Convention, which states that the main policy objective of the convention is to promote gender equality and “to combat violence against women, i.e., to prevent and reduce levels of violence, protect women from violence and support victims, thereby saving lives and improving the quality of life of victims.”¹³⁸ The Roadmap signals that “victims of violence against women must be better protected across Europe.”¹³⁹ While many within the EU want it to formally accede to the Istanbul Convention, that step remains unfulfilled.¹⁴⁰ One HRD attributes the setback to EU accession to Poland and Hungary, explaining:

At the EU level, the issue is not really about the myths and rhetoric around the Istanbul Convention, because most of the people are actually in favor of the Istanbul Convention. It’s literally just two countries blocking it, and all of the others are fine with it. So, if Poland and Hungary wouldn’t block it, we would have the Istanbul Convention signed for years now.¹⁴¹

EU ratification is further complicated by proceedings before the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to clarify the legal basis for EU accession to the Istanbul Convention.¹⁴² The ECJ held a hearing on October 6, 2020,¹⁴³ and the date for a decision remains unclear. Meanwhile, the opposition is mounting a multi-country effort to oppose EU accession to the convention.¹⁴⁴ As described on pages 74-76 the opposition misrepresents the Istanbul Convention as an unwanted imposition stemming from the EU and depicts ratification as an encroachment on states’ sovereignty.

⁴⁷ Belgium Interview 1.

⁴⁸ UN General Assembly, “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,” *A/RES/34/180*, 34th sess.: 1979-1980 (Dec. 18, 1979), <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>. CEDAW, the earliest of the three treaties, does not contain a specific provision on violence against women, but the CEDAW Committee adopted General Recommendation No. 12 on violence against women in 1989, later followed by General Recommendation No. 19 of 1992 that explained the definition of discrimination includes gender-based violence, that is, violence against a woman because she is a woman, or which disproportionately affects women. Dubravka Šimonović, “Global and Regional Standards on Violence against Women: The Evolution and Synergy of the CEDAW and Istanbul Conventions,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Aug. 2014), 600. See also General Recommendation No. 35 of 2017, updating General Recommendation No. 19 of 1992. Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), “General Recommendation No. 35,” U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/35 (July 26, 2017).

⁴⁹ Organization of American States, “Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (“Convention of Belem Do Para”)” (1994), <https://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/a-61.html>.

⁵⁰ African Union, “Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa,” (July 11, 2003), <https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa>.

⁵¹ Beijing 1995 Fourth World Conference of Women, “Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, Adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women” (Oct. 27, 1995), <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/fwcwn.html>.

⁵² Mridula Shrestha, “Istanbul Convention Poised to Enhance Global Efforts to Eradicate Violence against Women and Domestic Violence,” *American Society of International Law* (Feb. 11, 2015), <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/19/issue/4/istanbul-convention-poised-enhance-global-efforts-eradicate-violence>; Šimonović, “Global and Regional Standards on Violence against Women: The Evolution and Synergy of the CEDAW and Istanbul Conventions.”

⁵³ The definition reads as follows:

For the purposes of this recommendation, the term “violence against women” is to be understood as any act of gender-based violence, which results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

a. violence occurring in the family or domestic unit, including, inter alia, physical and mental aggression, emotional and psychological abuse, rape and sexual abuse, incest, rape between spouses, regular or occasional partners and cohabitants, crimes committed in the name of honour, female genital and sexual mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, such as forced marriages;

b. violence occurring within the general community, including, inter alia, rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in institutions or elsewhere trafficking in women for the purposes of sexual exploitation and economic exploitation and sex tourism; c. violence perpetrated or condoned by the state or its officials; d. violation of the human rights of women in situations of armed conflict, in particular the taking of hostages, forced displacement, systematic rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, and trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation and economic exploitation. Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, “Recommendation Rec(2002)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Protection of Women against Violence,” (Apr. 30, 2002), https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805e2612.

⁵⁴ Article 3(a), Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.”

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.* at Article 2.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at Article 1.

⁵⁸ Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Questions and Answers,” *Council of Europe Online Resources*, <https://rm.coe.int/istanbul-convention-questions-and-answers/16808f0b80>.

⁵⁹ *Id.* States Parties are those countries that have ratified the convention.

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ Article 5, Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.”

⁶² Council of Europe, “Istanbul Convention, Official Co-Ordinating Bodies,” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/list-of-official-co-ordinating-bodies>.

⁶³ Articles 38-40, Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.”

⁶⁴ *Id.* at Articles 5, 8, 16, 23-24, 26-27.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at Article 6. Council of Europe, “About GREVIO – Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence,” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/grevio>.

⁶⁶ Council of Europe, “Chart of Signatures and Ratifications of Treaty 210.” CoE does not yet reflect Moldova as having ratified the convention but Parliament approved ratification on October 14, 2021 and PACE welcomed Moldova as the 35th ratifying country. See footnote 7.

⁶⁷ “Istanbul Convention: Poland to Leave European Treaty on Violence against Women,” *BBC News* (July 25, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53538205>.

⁶⁸ “Poland Invites Slovenia to Withdraw from Convention Aimed at Preventing Violence against Women;” Ciobanu, “Poland’s Replacement for Istanbul Convention Would Ban Abortion and Gay Marriage.”

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- ⁷⁰ Council of Europe, “Chart of Signatures and Ratifications of Treaty 210.”
- ⁷¹ European Commission for Democracy through Law, “Armenia - Opinion on the Constitutional Implications of the Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) Adopted by the Venice Commission at Its 120th Plenary Session (Venice, 11-12 Oct. 2019),” Opinion No. 961 (Oct. 14, 2019), [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2019\)018-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2019)018-e).
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- ¹³⁵ Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe and the European Union: Different Roles, Shared Values,” *Council of Europe* (Accessed June 27, 2021), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/european-union>.
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¹⁴² Dolores Utrilla, “Insight: On the Powers of EU and Its Member States for the Ratification of Mixed Human Rights Agreements: The Court of Justice’s Pending Opinion in *Convention D’istanbul*,” *EU Law Live* (Oct. 13, 2020), <https://eulawlive.com/insight-on-the-powers-of-the-eu-and-its-member-states-for-the-ratification-of-mixed-human-rights-agreements-the-court-of-justices-pending-opinion-in-convention-distanbul/>.

¹⁴³ Utrilla, “Insight: On the Powers of EU and Its Member States for the Ratification of Mixed Human Rights Agreements: The Court of Justice’s Pending Opinion in *Convention D’istanbul*.”

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PART I: UNDERSTANDING THE OPPOSITION

OPPOSITION FORCES

The opposition leverages several factors to foster anti-Istanbul Convention sentiments, as well as anti-SRR and anti-LGBTI biases. Among them are the influence of the U.S. religious right movement, the U.S. NGO World Congress of Families, Russia's larger goals to undermine the West, the creation of "secular" European NGOs, and support from actors within organized religions.



INFLUENCE OF THE U.S. RELIGIOUS RIGHT

As certain opportunities eluded the U.S. religious right in the U.S. over the last 20 years, it turned to Europe and other parts of the world, especially in its crusade to oppose same-sex marriage, limit abortion, and support the traditional family.¹⁴⁵ Europe's conservative religious right embraced the lessons brought by the U.S. religious right. Key lessons exported to Europe that now underpin the opposition's strategy include the following:

- Regardless of the religious organization to which they belong, many religious conservatives have more in common with each other than with their fellow congregants. They band together across denominations and even religions to form national and transnational networks to achieve their shared goals.¹⁴⁶ This tactic has permeated the CEE where one Bulgarian HRD explained, "I am religious, so it was shocking the Orthodox Christian Church is so connected with other religions in their opposition [to the Istanbul Convention and homosexuality], since the Orthodox Church position has been not to engage in anything interdenominational."¹⁴⁷
- Cultivating politicians and political parties and simultaneously engaging the public to lobby them is vital for responding to opposing forces. Domestic action at the local, provincial, and national levels, as well as a focus on the Council of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), other EU organizations, and UN organizations in Geneva, is necessary.
- Long-term perspective, planning, and funding is essential. It will take generations to fully effect the desired changes in laws and transform society. Education and

cultivation of youth who will be able to carry on the work is necessary. Multiple HRDs described the opposition as skilled at reaching youth, in some cases even disseminating their values through religious youth camps—a venue most human rights groups lack.¹⁴⁸

- Effective strategies require sophisticated communications, especially tied to social messaging, the embrace of modern technology, and cyberskills.
- Lawfare, or the use of law and litigation to achieve social, political, and other goals, plays an important strategic role. It is a key element to success.¹⁴⁹ See the Waging Lawfare section on pages 107-116.
- “NGO-ization” provides tactical advantages. The U.S. religious right generally operates through U.S. non-profit institutions. While these institutions are not part of or controlled by an organized religion, they have missions tied to goals in the secular and political arenas, and promote religious beliefs aimed at prohibiting abortion, same-sex marriages, sex education in schools, while criminalizing homosexuality.

Neil Datta, Secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development, explains that “the U.S. movement has 30 years more experience. They tested out all these things. They have policy norms at hand that can be adapted to the local context and outclass Europeans in strategic litigation.”¹⁵⁰

WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES

The World Congress of Families (WCF) is a program of the U.S. NGO Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society (Howard Center).¹⁵¹ The WCF became the primary vehicle to bring the U.S. religious right and its “lessons learned” to Europe and fostered the creation of the interlocking networks that today support the European opposition to the Istanbul Convention. World Congresses of Families are convenings that bring together representatives of organized religion,¹⁵² the U.S. religious right,¹⁵³ and individuals and secularized NGOs from Europe and Russia,¹⁵⁴ as well as from Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere.¹⁵⁵ The WCF gatherings promote a shared vision for large, traditional, “natural” families, advocate political action on the opposition’s key issues—to ban abortion, limit contraception and divorce, ban same-sex marriage, criminalize same-sex relations, and prohibit sex education—ally themselves across religious denominations, and provide a forum for the U.S. religious right to share the strategies, skills, and tools it has honed from its work in the U.S.¹⁵⁶ Attracting political actors and government representatives to WCFs, especially those charged with family policy and health issues, appears to be a key goal.¹⁵⁷ This strategy has helped expand political influence and

networks. Government sponsorship and/or Presidential-level endorsement is also important and has supported the WCFs in Warsaw, Poland in 2007;¹⁵⁸ the “suspended” Moscow, Russia conference in 2014;¹⁵⁹ Budapest, Hungary in 2017;¹⁶⁰ and Chisinau, Moldova in 2018.¹⁶¹ It is unclear whether the Italian government sponsored the 2019 WCF in Verona. Matteo Salvini, Italy’s then Deputy Prime Minister, was the keynote speaker but many politicians, including the then Prime Minister, and several political parties denounced and distanced themselves from the WCF.¹⁶²

Table D: Location and Year of WCFs

A total of 13 WCFs, 10 in Europe, have taken place.¹⁶³

Year	Country	Held in Europe	Held in a European Country, Part of the Former Soviet Union
1997	Prague, Czech Republic	✓	✓
1999	Geneva, Switzerland	✓	
2004	Mexico City, Mexico		
2007	Warsaw, Poland	✓	✓
2009	Amsterdam, The Netherlands	✓	
2011	Madrid, Spain	✓	
2013	Sydney, Australia		
2014	Moscow, Russia (suspended)	✓	✓
2015	Salt Lake City, U.S.		
2016	Tbilisi, Georgia	✓	✓
2017	Budapest, Hungary	✓	✓
2018	Chisinau, Moldova	✓	✓
2019	Verona, Italy	✓	

The WCF’s focus on Europe has been intentional. Allan Carlson, the first Howard Center president, opposed the EU’s secular positions on the family, noting “a battle brewing in the EU over the future of family policy.”¹⁶⁴ Of the ten European WCFs, six were in countries formerly part of or controlled by the FSU—a focus in line with the Russian interests described below.¹⁶⁵ By 2019, WCFs had become “a geopolitical and ideological battleground” for the U.S. religious right and Russia to “save the world from the plague of liberalism and tolerance.”¹⁶⁶

The Global Shift of the Howard Center

The success of the WCFs and alignment with Russian geopolitical interests led to a transformation of the Howard Center's board. When the Howard Center approved the WCF concept in the 1990s, it had a U.S. Board of Directors with a predominantly Mormon influence.¹⁶⁷ Over the years, particularly after its involvement with Russia starting in 2011, the board underwent a material transformation. Board numbers were gradually reduced to six as the following activists, each with their own overseas networks joined: Vincente Segu (Mexico and Latin America), Luca Volontè (Italy and Europe), Ignacio Arsuaga (Spain), and Alexey Komov (Russia).¹⁶⁸ The four non-U.S. nationals now outnumber the two U.S. nationals: Brian Brown and Stan Swim. Brown, known for his anti-LGBTI activism and worldwide support for referendums to define marriage as the union of a biological male and a biological female, became WCF's president in 2016.¹⁶⁹ Swim is the only remaining director from the original WCF board and is a key tie to Mormon interests.¹⁷⁰ The new board reflects ties to networks of the Christian right in Latin America, Europe (specifically Italy and Spain), and Russia. In addition, Arsuaga and Brown are active in Africa and other parts of the world.¹⁷¹

The diagram below illustrates the WCF-fostered connections that links individuals, NGOs, religious institutions, governments, and donors and has become a model for the religious right opposition networks.

Diagram A: World Congress of Families: Network Generator for Opposition to the Istanbul Convention



RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE AND GEOPOLITICAL GOALS

The backlash against the Istanbul Convention is part of a wider agenda by Russia to expand its traditional values and anti-LGBTI and anti-women's rights agenda throughout Europe, as well as weaken the EU. Some of the U.S. religious right and individuals and institutions within Europe found their goals aligned with many of those of Russia. A statement by the WCF's Managing Director Larry Jacobs, made shortly after Russia invaded Crimea, demonstrates the *de facto* alliance between the WCF and Russia to push forward shared goals: "I think Russia is the hope for the world right now. Russian Eastern Europe leadership, I believe, is necessary to counter the secular, post-modern, anti-family agenda and replace what I'm calling the cultural Marxist philosophy that's destroying human society, in particular, destroying family."¹⁷² Nevertheless, the WCF does not admit to involvement with Putin's efforts to undermine the West and asserts that Russians have never made financial contributions to it.¹⁷³

Eleven of the 14 reviewed countries were part of or under the control of the FSU, with the exceptions of Croatia, Italy, and Turkey. In the case of Italy, Russian ties have historically been strong.¹⁷⁴ Among the 14 reviewed countries, 12 are North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, with the exceptions of Armenia and Moldova.¹⁷⁵ These factors help to account for Putin's geopolitical interest in drawing these countries away from the West, the EU, and NATO and back into Russia's sphere of influence.¹⁷⁶ Russia seeks to divide and weaken the continent (and the broader West) to block any challenge to its interests, especially its influence over former Soviet states.¹⁷⁷ In particular, Putin has strong interests in preventing NATO and the EU from moving into or influencing post-Soviet areas.¹⁷⁸

The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church

Since the time of Stalin, Russian authorities have used the Russian Orthodox Church as its proxy to execute its goals.¹⁷⁹ In 2003, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a working group to realize a variety of foreign policy and international goals.¹⁸⁰ Under Putin, the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as Orthodox individuals, their foundations, and their NGOs help the Kremlin realize its geopolitical goals to undermine EU political integration, liberal values, and the influence of the U.S. and NATO.¹⁸¹

Russia uses a pro-traditional family, anti-LGBTI, and anti-Istanbul Convention message to position itself as a global leader against the West's "moral decay," foment sentiments against the EU, NATO, individual human rights, and the U.S., and bring the CEE countries within the realm of Russian influence.¹⁸² Russian government officials and Orthodox Church leaders reject "the idea that individual human rights prevail over the interests of society." This approach

enables Russia to present itself as the guardian of traditional values in Russia and abroad.¹⁸³ Moreover, the anti-LGBTI message is influential in Russia where 85 percent of Russians believe that homosexuality is morally wrong.¹⁸⁴ Ultimately, the Istanbul Convention, perceived as upholding many values that Russia detests, has become collateral damage in Russia's larger efforts to achieve its geopolitical goals.¹⁸⁵

A study, which examined Central Europe's views of the U.S., Russia, EU, and NATO, assessed vulnerability to subversive Russian influence in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Out of 100, Hungary scored the most vulnerable at 57, followed by Slovakia at 51, the Czech Republic at 38, and Poland at 30.¹⁸⁶

Russian influence, however, does not necessarily determine a country's opposition to the Istanbul Convention. For example, Croatia, even as part of the former Yugoslavia, lacks Serbia's pro-Russian ties but nevertheless contains a pervasive opposition to the convention.¹⁸⁷ Also, Poland historically has not welcomed Russian influence.¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Poland's far-right PiS (Law and Justice) Party has been a leader in opposing the Istanbul Convention, abortion, and LGBTI rights, as well as taking action to diminish the rule of law and space for civil society to work.¹⁸⁹ When the PiS Party came to power in 2015, it announced it would withdraw Poland from the Istanbul Convention.¹⁹⁰ Efforts by women's groups forestalled this effort for five years until 2020,¹⁹¹ when Poland initiated its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.¹⁹²

“SECULARIZED” NGOS

The emergence of “secularized” civil society organizations that are seemingly independent from organized religions is a key component of the Istanbul Convention opposition. Their missions are tied to conservative religious values, and they tend to actively oppose LGBTI rights, reproductive rights, and the rights of women that threaten their vision of the traditional family (see pages 62-68 for a discussion of the “traditional family”). This includes the rights embodied in the Istanbul Convention. Their leaders often have close personal ties to a Church.¹⁹⁴ A Belarusian HRD explained these organizations “pretend to be democratic and do not cooperate with other NGOs.”¹⁹⁵

The creation of NGOs by individuals affiliated with the conservative religious movement is an important strategy for several reasons.¹⁹⁶ NGOs enable better engagement in political, legal, and international institutions.¹⁹⁷ A Croatian HRD illustrated the tactical advantage this approach gives the opposition, explaining, “The Catholic

“CIVIL SOCIETY USED TO MEAN, BY DEFINITION, ‘NECESSARILY GOOD’ AND AN ORGANIZATION THAT IS FIGHTING FOR RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE. THIS IS NOT SO ANYMORE. THEY ARE ORGANIZING AS CIVIL SOCIETY.”

Moldovan interviewee¹⁹³

Church has formed a parallel civil society. The National Foundation for Civil Society [a government-created and funded entity] could not reject the groups that the Church has created and helped finance.”¹⁹⁸ By using human rights rhetoric and the language and actions of human rights NGOs, these secularized NGOs gain both credibility and access to institutions and the public.¹⁹⁹ In addition, secularized NGOs are not constrained in their rhetoric or actions as organized religions are, and it allows laypersons to “interpret” beliefs and the appropriate activities to achieve them.²⁰⁰ They are free to construe their religious values and choose a course of action different from actions taken by official organized religions. This strategy, for example, allows the Catholic Church to support the opposition’s arguments without an actual endorsement of messaging and tactics that might be viewed as too extreme.

Notwithstanding their religious connections, these NGOs minimize their religious nature in public-facing activities. In line with messaging tactics described on pages 103-104, they employ modern, vivid, and joyful imagery that features families.²⁰¹ Observers described protests put on by these NGOs as generally breaking tradition from the usual religious gatherings to more “colorful, youthful and festive,” and are “reminiscent of Pride Parades or techno music gatherings” to camouflage their religious and political nature.²⁰²

The emergence of these secular NGOs is shrinking the space for and trust in women’s NGOs working to promote the Istanbul Convention. In Hungary, the number of human rights-based women’s NGOs has been decreasing, while the number of conservative women’s organizations has been growing.²⁰³ A Lithuanian HRD corroborated that her country’s NGO base is also “shrinking.”²⁰⁴ In Latvia, activists lamented there is “no funding for NGOs. [It is] almost all volunteer work.”²⁰⁵ If there are resources for NGO work on violence against women, it tends to come from other countries, such as Sweden or the U.S.”²⁰⁶ In Belarus, conservative NGOs are “popping up [and] . . . co-opting the language and activities of civil society NGOs.”²⁰⁷ These secular NGOs also harm women’s NGOs in other ways. A Bulgarian HRD remarked on the “growing presence of NGOs on the right, placing women and NGO human rights defenders at risk.”²⁰⁸

The secularized NGOs listed in the chart below came into existence in Europe in the 21st century, most of them in 2013 or later. The authors highlight these NGOs because they all have one or more of the following characteristic: they operate in the reviewed countries, they oppose the Istanbul Convention, are regarded as experts within the opposition, and/or have leaders with close ties to organized religion. The opposition’s success depends on its ability to forge networks where key individuals know one other and can advise each other’s organizations.

Table E. Representative List of Secularized NGOs Formed in Europe

Secular Organization/ Network	Year Formed	Overview, Scope, and Focus
Agenda Europe	2013	Agenda Europe seeks to roll back SRR and Vatican II reforms. ²⁰⁹ Agenda Europe is highly secretive. Not registered as an NGO or other legal entity, Agenda Europe operates a blog and gathers 100-150 Christian activists in annual summits. ²¹⁰ Its “Restoring the Natural Order Manifesto” is a blueprint for opposition action. There is evidence that Russian WCF Board member, Alexey Komov, spoke at one annual Agenda Europe summit. ²¹¹
Ordo iuris (Poland)	2013 in Poland, followed by offices in Croatia, Estonia, The Netherlands, Slovakia, and Switzerland	Ordo iuris is tied to the ultra-conservative Catholic group TFP and has spread throughout Europe. Formed in 2013 by the Piotr Skarga Foundation Institute of Christian Culture, it has expanded its lawfare franchise to Croatia, ²¹² Estonia, ²¹³ the Netherlands, ²¹⁴ Slovakia, ²¹⁵ and Switzerland, ²¹⁶ although the Ordo iuris name is used officially only in Croatia. ²¹⁷ It has attained consultative status at the UN. ²¹⁸ It is behind Poland’s initiative to launch a so-called Convention on the Rights of the Family to replace the Istanbul Convention. ²¹⁹ Ordo iuris, part of Agenda Europe, hosted an Agenda Europe annual summit in Warsaw in 2016. ²²⁰ Ordo iuris is deeply intertwined with Poland’s ruling PiS Party. ²²¹ See the Waging Lawfare section on pages 107-116, which highlights many of Ordo iuris’ projects and funding sources.
CitizenGO	2013 in Spain	CitizenGO is a global opposition petition platform in 13 languages that has expanded its offices to Russia, Italy, Hungary, and many other locations. ²²² Its head, Ignacio Arsuaga, is a WCF Board member. ²²³ WCF current President Brian Brown and WCF Board members Luca Volontè (Italy) and Alexey Komov (Russia) sit on the CitizenGO Board. ²²⁴ CitizenGO/Arsuaga are part of Agenda Europe and Arsuaga, although its Spanish organization (HazteOir) has proven ties to the secretive, paramilitary, ultra-conservative Catholic organization formed in Mexico known as “El Yunque.” ²²⁵ Arsuaga is also known for his support of the far-right Spanish political party Vox. ²²⁶
Dignitatis Humanae Institute (DHI)	2013 in Italy	DHI is an Italian ultra-conservative research organization and think tank tied to political action and conservative Roman Catholic Cardinals, many of whom hold positions in the Vatican. ²²⁷ Its current efforts include the creation of a school for politicians seeking to defend the Judeo-Christian values in the public arena. ²²⁸ Its first chairman was Luca Volontè, former CoE Parliamentarian, WCF Board member, CitizenGO board member, and founder of the Italian anti-abortion NGO Terrae Novae Foundation. ²²⁹
In the Name of the Family	2013 in Croatia	In the Name of the Family is headed by activist Željka Markić, a regular attendee and speaker at WCFs. Her organization spearheaded the successful marriage referendum in Croatia. ²³⁰ While Markić has never acknowledged membership in the Catholic group Opus Dei, ²³¹ other family-focused organizations that she formed are part of the International Federation for Family Development that supports parenting in the spirit of the Opus Dei founder’s teachings. ²³² She is active in Agenda Europe. ²³³
Vigilare and Vigliare Foundation	2011 in Croatia	Vigilare and Vigliare Foundation were formed by John Vice Batarelo, Head of the Office for the Pastoral Care of the Family of the Zagrebi Archdiocese, with the goal of promoting “conservative social values and the culture of life.” ²³⁴ Vigilare launched the campaign “I want to Live” with videos, posters, and flyers condemning abortion, using the “voice” and perspective of the aborted fetus crying for help. ²³⁵ It has a

Secular Organization/ Network	Year Formed	Overview, Scope, and Focus
		sister organization, Vigilare Foundation, whose funding is tied to sources associated with Poland’s Ordo Iuris. ²³⁶ Vigilare is recognized as part of TFP. ²³⁷
ADF International	2012 in Vienna, followed by operations in Belgium, France, and England.	<p>ADF International was set up in Europe by the U.S. lawfare NGO, Alliance Defending Freedom, and now has offices in Vienna, Austria and three other European countries.²³⁸ As a legal entity established in a member country of the EU, ADF International can more readily participate in European policy debates than its U.S. parent and can lobby at the European level. ADF International is accredited with the European Parliament and European Commission,²³⁹ but has been denied participatory status at the CoE.²⁴⁰ ADF International is part of Agenda Europe. The site run by Agenda Europe is registered in the name of ADF International’s Sophia Kuby,²⁴¹ who is responsible for ADF International’s EU advocacy in Belgium.²⁴² It opposes the Istanbul Convention, lobbies the EU against ratification of the convention, and urges countries not to sign or ratify the convention or to withdraw if they have already ratified the convention.²⁴³ ADF International states:</p> <p>The Istanbul Convention is an international agreement that is problematic for various reasons. It codifies a new, controversial, and non-agreed definition of ‘gender’ in international law; it stereotypically portrays men and boys as perpetrators of violence; it would infringe parental rights in educational matters.²⁴⁴</p>
Bulgarian Society and Values Association	2007	The Bulgarian Society and Values Association was formed by the evangelical, Mihaela Djorgova, who previously worked for different religious institutions, including the Apostolic Church “Prelom,” where her husband used to be a priest. ²⁴⁵ The Bulgarian Society and Values Association works with the WCF and together with it organized a “Week of Marriage” in Bulgaria. The organization was a leader in the successful attack on the Istanbul Convention. ²⁴⁶

ACTORS FROM AND WITHIN DOMINANT RELIGIONS

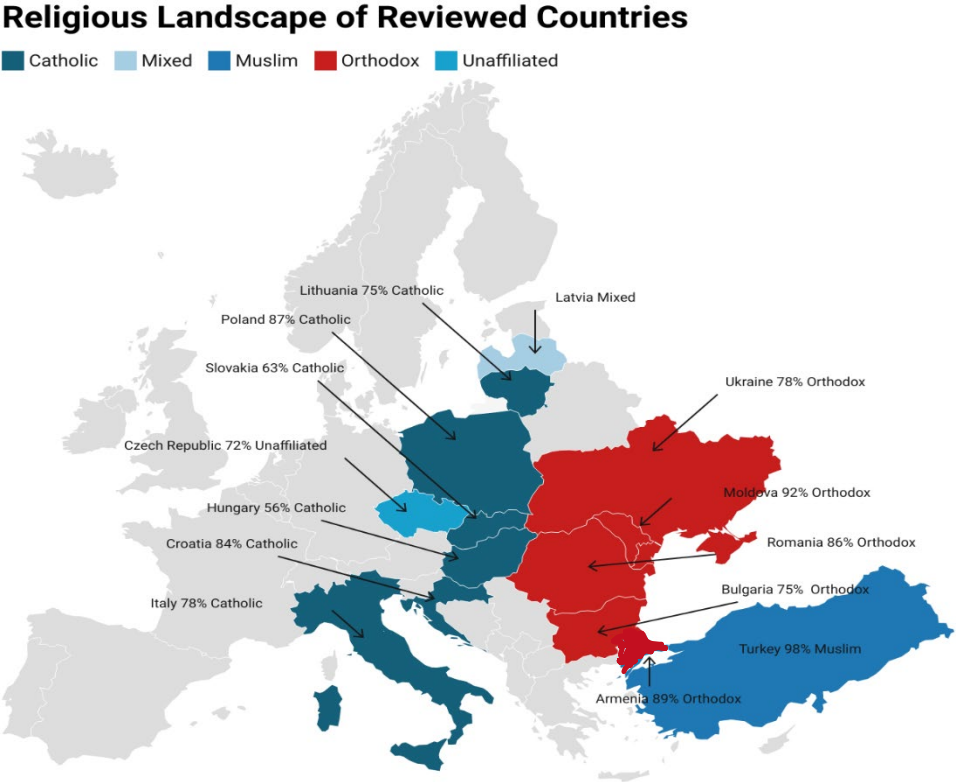
Actors within organized religions are key elements of the opposition to the Istanbul Convention and active in spreading disinformation in some countries. There are differences both among organized religions and within the same religion, including respective political influence, use of disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric, and engagement with secularized NGOs.

There are three dominant religions in the 14 reviewed countries: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Sunni Islam.²⁴⁷ The map below shows religious majorities in each country from Pew Research survey data, supplemented by information from the Association of Religion Data Archives in the case of Turkey.²⁴⁸ The other single largest religion in the 14 reviewed countries is Lutheranism, which amounts to 20 percent in Latvia.²⁴⁹ Christian evangelicals, who comprise an important part of the U.S. religious right, are less prominent in this region.²⁵⁰ Nonetheless,

the Bulgarian NGO Society and Values Association is led by an evangelical and played a key role in opposing the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria.²⁵¹

It is important to note that organized religion is not always among the opposition in all countries. At times, the Church is an ally on human rights issues, as is the case with the death penalty and immigration.²⁵² In 2017, leaders from Cyprus’ five main faith-based communities, Cyprus, Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite and Latin Catholic, issued a joint statement condemning violence against women and girls.²⁵³ In November 2020, the Vatican confirmed Pope Francis’ belief that LGBTI couples should enjoy the legal protections afforded by a civil union.²⁵⁴ Europe’s largest evangelical association, the European Evangelical Alliance, has expressed its support for the Istanbul Convention, releasing a 2021 statement on the convention’s 10th anniversary condemning “murder, rape, sexual harassment, forced marriage, forced abortion or sterilisation, coercive control, so-called “honour killings,” degrading sexual and violent media content.”²⁵⁵

Map 1.



Source: Pew Research Data and the Association of Research Data Archives for Turkey • Created with Datawrapper

The Russian Orthodox Church remains influential in much of the CEE and has close ties to the Russian Government.²⁵⁶ A 2017 survey confirmed the importance of the Orthodox Church and

Russia, especially to Moldova (92 percent), Armenia (89 percent), Serbia (88 percent), Romania (86 percent), Ukraine (78 percent), Bulgaria (75 percent), as well as Greece (90 percent), Georgia (89 percent), Belarus (73 percent), and Russia (71 percent).²⁵⁷ It found that many people in CEE, particularly Orthodox Christians, value the link between religion and national identity.²⁵⁸ Significantly, this link affects the public's beliefs about the relationship between Church and state; approximately one-third of those surveyed in predominantly Orthodox countries believe that state policies should support the dissemination of religious values.²⁵⁹

The Roman Catholic Church recognizes the Pope as its head. Through the Vatican, it provides guidance on the Church's views, including on matters related to the family, the roles of mothers and fathers, family life, and SRR.²⁶⁰ The Holy See has special status as a Permanent Observer State to the UN General Assembly, thereby providing it with direct access to the UN system.²⁶¹ As described above, organized religion is not united in their opposition. There are far-right clerical factions and NGOs that perceive the Pope as too liberal and are united in their opposition to the Istanbul Convention.²⁶² This fissure within the Catholic Church has trickled down to the national level. For example, an interviewee corroborated other reports that the Polish Roman Catholic Church does not follow the teachings of the current Pope, explaining, "They have their own agenda...They strongly criticize the Pope and do not agree with such a tolerant approach."²⁶³

Within the CEE region, opposition members associate with ultra-conservative Catholic groups that are often NGOs seeking to promote a pro-traditional family, anti-SRR agenda. These groups and NGOs are not, however, uniform. Examples include:

- **Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP)** is described as a "transnational, ultra-conservative, Catholic-inspired influence network."²⁶⁴ Its hallmarks are extreme religious conservatism and political activism.²⁶⁵ Within Europe and the reviewed countries, there are a number of TFP-connected entities, all opposing the Istanbul Convention. The first Polish TFP entity, the Piotr Skaraga Institute Foundation for Social and Religious Education, was formed in 2001.²⁶⁶ Its supervisory board members, Caio Xavier de Silveira (TFP France) and Matthias von Gersdorf (TFP Germany) provided the start-up funds.²⁶⁷ The Polish TFP later established other entities, including the lawfare organization Ordo Iuris.²⁶⁸
- ***El Yunque (the Anvil)*** is a paramilitary, ultra-conservative Catholic organization formed in Mexico.²⁶⁹ *El Yunque* endorses violent action and recruits heavily among youth.²⁷⁰ Spain is the country of its greatest influence where *El Yunque* has funded groups like HazteOir.²⁷¹ Ignacio Arsuaga formed both HazteOir and the influential opposition global organization CitizenGO.²⁷²

- **Opus Dei** was formed in Spain in 1928. It maintains secrecy with respect to its 90,000 members, of whom approximately 1,800 are priests.²⁷³ Its website shows activity in Spain, Italy, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Russia, among other locations.²⁷⁴ Membership, whether as a priest or lay person, is seen as a “vocation” and serious commitment.²⁷⁵ Opus Dei has been criticized for a variety of reasons,²⁷⁶ which *The New York Times* lists as: “totalitarian control over members; involvement in right-wing politics, particularly in the Government of Francisco Franco during his long dictatorship and more recently, it is rumored, on behalf of right-wing Latin American regimes; recruiting of young people without parental consent and alienating them from their families; discrimination against women, and elitism.”²⁷⁷
- **Unofficial, old world, ultra-conservative Catholics** within the orbit of the Italian NGO, DHI, and Agenda Europe. DHI describes itself as a “think tank” with the goal of influencing politics.²⁷⁸ Its advisory board is comprised of Cardinals, many with positions at the Vatican.²⁷⁹ Agenda Europe is “a Vatican-inspired, professional advocacy network, whose members meet in secret, and which is reported to be directly responsible for implementing a detailed strategy to roll back human rights.”²⁸⁰

In Turkey, the highest religious authority is the Diyanet.²⁸¹ Some observers assert that the Diyanet has become an extension of President Erdoğan’s policies,²⁸² including policies that erode the secular state. President Erdoğan and his AK Party, much like Órban and his Fidesz Party in Hungary,²⁸³ have been architects behind undermining the rights of women and fomenting opposition to the Istanbul Convention.²⁸⁴

Table F below identifies the dominant religion in each reviewed country and the roles that religious authorities have played in opposing the convention, including, in some instances making inaccurate statements about the Istanbul Convention.²⁸⁵

Table F. Religious Authorities Opposing the Istanbul Convention in Reviewed Countries

Reviewed Country, Dominant Religion ²⁸⁶	Religious Authorities Opposing the Istanbul Convention
Armenia 89% Orthodox	The Armenian Apostolic Church attacks the Istanbul Convention, claiming that it implies a third gender (which is not accurate). ²⁸⁷
Bulgaria 75% Orthodox	Many Bulgarian religious groups, including the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, oppose the Istanbul Convention, claiming its ratification will lead to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Bulgaria and increase the likelihood of young people identifying as transgender. ²⁸⁸ The Bulgarian Orthodox Church urged lawmakers not to approve the Istanbul Convention because it “raised concern about the future of European Christian civilization, importing alien values” and corroding morals. ²⁸⁹
Czech Republic 72% Religiously Unaffiliated	Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, together with the Greek Catholic Church, the Unity of the Brotherhood, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Silesian Evangelical Churches addressed a joint letter to the Czech Parliament in advance of its decision on ratification of the Istanbul Convention. They maintained that the convention was neither necessary nor beneficial for the Czech Republic. ²⁹⁰
Croatia 74% Catholic	The Croatian Roman Catholic Church reiterated its opposition to the Istanbul Convention, labelling it “heresy,” ²⁹¹ because the Church incorrectly asserts that it “contains a paragraph about gender ideology.” ²⁹² Many interviewees cited the Roman Catholic Church’s opposition to the Istanbul Convention and other women’s rights as an important factor in Croatia. ²⁹³ Notwithstanding this opposition, Croatia ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2018. ²⁹⁴
Latvia No dominant religion, religiously mixed	Latvia’s four religious leaders representing the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, the Latvian Orthodox Church, and the Union of Baptist Churches in Latvia opposed the convention. ²⁹⁵
Lithuania 78% Catholic	The Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference, the ruling body of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, incorrectly stated that the convention would make Lithuania change its gender concept and introduce “unacceptable notions about homosexuality.” ²⁹⁶ Lithuania’s religious leaders, including the president of the Lithuanian Bishops Conference, the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Lithuania, Head of the Old Believers’ Church of Lithuania, Head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania, and General Superintendent of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania, issued a joint statement opposing the Istanbul Convention. ²⁹⁷
Hungary 56% Catholic	Although Hungary is a majority Catholic country, the Church does not lead the opposition to the Istanbul Convention in the same manner as in other reviewed countries. Rather, the main opponent to the Istanbul Convention is President Órban and his government. ²⁹⁸
Italy 78% Catholic	Italy ratified the convention in 2014. In Italy, the Roman Catholic Church appears more focused on ancillary issues to the Istanbul Convention, such as opposing abortion.
Moldova 82% Orthodox	The Moldovan Orthodox Church, which is canonically subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church in Moldova, has lobbied against the convention. ²⁹⁹
Poland 87% Catholic	The Polish Bishops’ Conference, the central administrative body for Catholic bishops in Poland, intervened in the debate over the Istanbul Convention, reiterating its opposition to the convention and calling for Poland’s withdrawal from the treaty. The Polish Bishops’ Conference further stated, “We welcome the emergence of a social legislative initiative to terminate the Istanbul Convention and replace it with the International Convention on the Rights of the Family, and we encourage support for this action.” ³⁰⁰
Romania 86% Orthodox	Romania ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2016, despite strong opposition from the Orthodox Church in Romania. According to one Romanian HRD, the anti-Istanbul Convention and anti-LGBTI organization Coalition for the Family is supported by the Orthodox Church. ³⁰¹
Slovak Republic 78% Catholic	The Roman Catholic Bishops in Slovakia issued a statement rejecting the Istanbul Convention “because of transgender-friendly language in the convention.” ³⁰² The representatives of the Slovak Christian Churches similarly published a common statement calling for the government to withdraw support for the convention, “criticizing it for spreading ‘gender ideology’ and an ‘anti-family agenda.’” ³⁰³
Turkey 83% Sunni Muslim	The official religious body in Turkey is the Diyanet. The authors have not located official statements by it against the Istanbul Convention. In recent years, it has been described as endorsing policies of Erdoğan and the AK Party. ³⁰⁴
Ukraine 71% Orthodox	In March 2016, the Byzantine Catholic Patriarchate’s website calls on Ukraine “to withdraw membership from the Council of Europe for the sake of Ukrainian children and Ukrainian families.” ³⁰⁵ Within the debate on the Istanbul Convention, one of the most important voices is that of the Council of Churches. ³⁰⁶ It has 18 members representing every major religious denomination in Ukraine: Evangelicals, Adventists, Roman Catholics, Greco-Catholics, Jews, all the various denominations of Orthodoxy, and a pair of imams. ³⁰⁷ The Council of Churches opposes ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine. ³⁰⁸

HRDs in several reviewed countries experience the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Church as powerful forces against the Istanbul Convention for several reasons. First, there is vast public faith in the Church. A Bulgarian HRD explained: “People in Bulgaria don’t trust the government, but they trust the Church as an institution.”³⁰⁹ When the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria backed the anti-Istanbul Convention campaign, it was highly influential.³¹⁰ In turn, the Church leverages this trust and its reach to exert pressure on the public. A Croatian journalist opined: “The Catholic Church messes up everything in this country. This places people, not only agnostics, but real Catholics, in a really uncomfortable position because Sunday mass becomes all about politics and education.”³¹¹ A Romanian HRD described how the Orthodox Church pressured congregants to sign the referendum against same-sex marriage: “Churches were collecting signatures by putting lists up in their doorways and asking people to sign. In a homophobic society, it is very difficult for people to refuse to sign publicly, as they fear being labelled as gay if they challenge anything.”³¹² Finally, a Ukrainian HRD recounted a call from her own parish priest about the convention. He chastised her, saying “You are making a big mistake. You should not be supporting ratification.”³¹³

Second, the Church is active in political lobbying. In Ukraine, a pro-Istanbul Convention activist explained the Council of Churches’ enormous influence in politics and in opposing ratification of the convention.³¹⁴ One academic described the Catholic Church in Poland as “a pressure group, a lobbying group. The Church hierarchy definitely pressures the ruling party.”³¹⁵ A MP told a Ukrainian HRD how politicians received a telephone call from the Church’s top levels a few days before Parliament’s hearing on ratification. Politicians were informed that the Church “would retaliate against them if they supported ratification.”³¹⁶ Another Ukrainian HRD explained how Church representatives visit the deputy of each political party. With respect to the Istanbul Convention and other women’s rights, they tell the deputies, “We will send letters to people who vote, and the next time they will no longer vote for you.”³¹⁷

Such activities persist despite many countries’ constitutional separation of church and state. A Ukrainian HRD commented that “the Church is [constitutionally] separate from the State,” and it runs counter to the Constitution for “the Church to have a direct influence on parliament’s decision.”³¹⁸ In Poland, while the Constitution recognizes a division between church and state, the Polish Roman Catholic Church is nevertheless a political power, and endorsement from a priest translates into more votes for politicians.³¹⁹ In Croatia, a HRD explained that although “Croatia is a secular country with a separation between church and state, that is not reflected in the current society and the pervasive impact of the Church.”³²⁰

Third, the Church is well-resourced. In Croatia, an interviewee stated that “the Church and its Catholic organizations are the most powerful institutions in Croatia and serve as a platform for

traditionalists to share their ideas.”³²¹ Croatia also ratified the Vatican Agreements with the Catholic Church, obligating it to give approximately 900 million kuna (121 million euros) annually to the Church for “legal affairs, economic affairs, cooperation in education and culture, and spiritual guidance.”³²² Catholic organizations actively give aid to NGOs and groups that are fighting for traditional or patriarchal policies.”³²³ A Croatian parliamentarian explained:

The top of the government is supporting Catholic groups....The Church became one of the richest organizations in the country. They have privileges and do not pay taxes. They receive money from believers and government organizations. They finance the radical right and interfere in hospitals, schools, universities culture and the government itself. Their strategy is to make the Church more powerful than all other political parties.³²⁴

Yet another Croatian HRD offered her opinion that the Church “is very powerful because it uses all the logistics of the Catholic Church.”³²⁵ Churches also operate unfettered by the restrictions imposed on NGOs. Another interviewee proffered her beliefs that the Church in Croatia has “allies from the U.S. and Eastern Europe. They have rich supporters. It is a business, and the Church can be used by businessmen for their own purposes, as well. There is no serious observation or control over the Church.”³²⁶

¹⁴⁵ Sabra Ayres and Laura King, “The Religious Right Lost the Fight over Gay Marriage in the U.S., but It Sees Hope in Eastern Europe,” *LA Times* (Oct. 5, 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-romania-referendum-20181005-story.html>; Rob Boston, “They Want the Whole World in Their Hands: Through the World Congress of Families, the Religious Right Is Building a Global Network,” *Americans United for the Separation of Church and State* (May 2019), <https://www.au.org/church-state/may-2019-church-state-magazine/cover-story/they-want-the-whole-world-in-their-hands>; Josh Kurlandtzick, “Tomorrow the World,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Oct. 22, 2007), <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/19703>.

¹⁴⁶ Jennifer Butler, “For Faith and Family: Christian Right Advocacy at the United Nations,” *Political Research Associates* (Sept. 1, 2000), <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2000/09/01/faith-and-family-christian-right-advocacy-united-nations>.

¹⁴⁷ Bulgaria Interview 8.

¹⁴⁸ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-10, 2019).

¹⁴⁹ Datta, “Modern-Day Crusaders in Europe. Tradition, Family and Property: Analysis of a Transnational, Ultra-Conservative, Catholic-Inspired Influence Network;” Alicia Ely Yamin, Neil Datta, and Ximena Andion, “Behind the Drama: The Roles of Transnational Actors in Legal Mobilization over Sexual and Reproductive Rights,” *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law* 19, Spring, no. 3 (2018); The Federation for Women and Family Planning, “Cultural and Religious Counterrevolution—Is Polish Law under the Threat of Christian Fundamentalists’ Ideology?” *The Federation for Women and Family Planning (Poland)* (2020), <https://en.federa.org.pl/about-us/>; <https://en.federa.org.pl/report-oi/>.

¹⁵⁰ Ciobanu, “New World Order: The ‘Natural Family’ Franchise Goes Global.”

¹⁵¹ The Howard Center operates the World Congress of Families as one of its programs. In 2016, it changed the name under which it does business to the “International Organization of the Family,” but its legal name remains the Howard Center. The Howard Center, apart from grants it received from Mormon entities for the first WCFs, generally lacks the resources to fund World Congresses directly and does not do so. As a U.S. nonprofit, the Howard Center must file annual

Form 990s with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service that reflect its income and expenditures. The Howard Center's income for all its programs typically ranges between \$500,000 to \$600,000 per year. Its Form 990s show that contributions, grant income, and expenditures are not used to finance WCFs except in connection with initial grants received for the first congresses. "Howard Center for Family, Religion & Society Form 990s Fiscal Year Ends 2001-2018," *ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer Database* (Accessed Apr. 20, 2021),

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/541788267>. The apparent formula used to finance World Congresses is non-transparent and depends on funding sources other than the WCF or Howard Center. For later WCFs, Russian individuals and entities appear to be material funding sources, although WCF denies receiving any money from Russian sources. See Section "Funding" on pages 121-126 for further discussion.

¹⁵² With respect to the Catholic Church, WCFs often secured representation from the Vatican, until the Vatican declined to support or send representation to the 2019 WCF in Verona, Italy. Claire Giangravè, "Family Congress in Verona Shows Tensions between Vatican and Populist Catholics," *CRUX: Taking the Catholic Pulse* (Apr. 9, 2019), 39-40, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-europe/2019/04/family-congress-in-verona-shows-tensions-between-vatican-and-populist-catholics/>; Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, "'The Great Battles Lie Ahead' Interview with Allan Carlson (in Moscow, Russia and in Verona, Italy)," *Innsbruck University Press* (2020), https://www.uibk.ac.at/iup/buch_pdfs/postsecular-conflicts/10.152033187-99-3-04.pdf; Pontifical Council For The Family, "World Congress of Families V on Modern Families, Traditional Values (Amsterdam, the Netherlands, from the 10-12 of August)," *Vatican Records* (2009), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_20090810_congr-amsterdam_en.html. With respect to the Orthodox Church, Archpriest Dmitri Smirnov helped facilitate the Russian relationship with the WCF until his death in 2020. He enlisted Alexey Komov to help increase involvement with the WCF. In 2011, Smirnov was instrumental in bringing the first WCF regional conference in Russia, which was organized by Alexey Komov. Smirnov attended and often spoke at subsequent WCFs. In 2011, the influential Patriarchal Commission on the Family, Motherhood and Childhood (PC-FMC) was formed. Smirnov was an initial member and became Chairman in 2013. Significantly, this religious commission included a few non-clerical members: the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, Natalia Yakunina, chairperson of the Sanctity of Motherhood Program and the wife of the oligarch Viktor Yakunin, and Putin's advisor on social issues. Smirnov was a co-convener of the planned 2014 Moscow WCF and arranged for the use of Christ the Savior Cathedral's Congress Hall as a venue, while PC-FMC member Malofeev and Yakunin funded the event as it went forward even as the WCF "suspended" its official branding and participation. Kristina Stoeckl, "The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: The Case of the World Congress of Families," *Religion, State and Society* 48, no. 4 (Aug. 7, 2020), 228-29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2020.1796172>; "Patriarchal Commission for Family Matters, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood Home Page," *Patriarchal Commission for Family Matters, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood Website* (Accessed June 6, 2021), <https://pk-semya.ru/>; "Church Figure, Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov," *TostPost.com* (May 8, 2019), <https://tostpost.com/spiritual-development/29873-church-figure-archpriest-dmitry-smirnov.html>. For Smirnov participation in WCFs, see, e.g., Madrid in 2012 (Don Feder, "World Congress of Families VI Opens in Madrid, Friday, May 25 Press Release," *Christian News Wire* (May 25, 2012), <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/5868619802.html>); Australia in 2013 ("A Report on Day One: Patriarchal Spiritualism and Authoritarian Moralism," *Catholics for Choice* (May 3, 2015), https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/issues_publications/a-report-on-day-one-patriarchal-spiritualism-and-authoritarian-moralism/); the suspended Moscow conference in 2014 (World Congress of Families, "WCF VIII 2014: Every Child a Gift: Large Families-Future of Humanity Program Draft, 2014," *World Congress of Families 2014 Brochure* (2014), <https://docu.tips/documents/world-congress-of-families-moscow-2014-brochure-5c1522292f79c>); Moldova in 2018 ("Chairman of the Patriarchal Commission on Family Matters, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, Spoke at the XII World Congress of Families," *The Unification of Christians* (Sept. 17, 2018), <https://incarnatewordssistershouston.org/chairman-of-the-patriarchal-commission-on-family-matters-protection-of-motherhood-and-childhood-spoke-at-the-xii-world-congress-of-families/>); and Verona in 2019 (International Organization for the Family, "Program for World Congress of Families XIII, the Wind of Change: Europe and the Global Pro-Family Movement, March 29-31, 2019 Verona, Italy," *International Organization for the Family* (2019),

<https://www.wcfverona.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/PROGRAMMA-CONGRESSO-FAMIGLIE-VERONA.pdf>). Stoeckl, “The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: The Case of the World Congress of Families”). For general information on the anti-gender activities of the Orthodox Church and other Russian actors associated with it, see Datta, “Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018,” 21-28.

The first WCFs were funded principally through Mormon interests and, according to Allan Carlson, “the Mormons have always been heavily involved.” Mormon delegations attended many WCFs. “Howard Center for Family, Religion & Society Form 990s Fiscal Year Ends 2001-2018;” Stoeckl and Uzlaner, “‘The Great Battles Lie Ahead’ Interview with Allan Carlson (in Moscow, Russia and in Verona, Italy),” 40; “LDs to Be at World Congress of Families,” *Desert News* (Feb. 15, 1997), <https://www.deseret.com/1997/2/15/20771266/lds-to-be-at-world-congress-of-families>; “LDs Church Leaders Speak About Congress of Families: ‘Celebration’ Adds Impetus to 1999 World Event, Looking Forward to Congress of Families,” *Desert News* (Nov. 15, 1999), <https://www.deseret.com/1999/11/15/19475657/lds-church-leaders-speak-about-congress-of-families-br-celebration-adds-impetus-to-1999-world-event>; Peggy Fletcher Stack, “World Congress of Families Opens on a Mormon Note as LDs Apostle Preaches Love for All,” *Salt Lake City Tribune* (Nov. 6, 2015), <https://archive.slttrib.com/article.php?id=3107076&itype=CMSID>.

¹⁵³ The U.S. Tradition, Family and Property entity is a long-standing participant and supporter of WCF, as are the Alliance Defending Freedom, Family First Foundation, Family Research Council, Family Watch International, Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-Fam), Concerned Women of America, and Population Research Institute, among others. See Trimble, “Conceiving a ‘Natural Family’ Order: The World Congress of Families and Transnational Conservative Christian Politics,” 229-31; Political Research Associates, “Everything You Need to Know About the Anti-LGBTQ World Congress of Families (WCF),” *Political Research Associates* (Oct. 21, 2015), <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2015/10/21/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-anti-lgbtq-world-congress-of-families-wcf#sthash.4zpVeA5p.dpbs>.

¹⁵⁴ French Society for Tradition, Family and Property (France), HazteOir and since its formation CitizenGO (Spain), and the Piotr Skarga Foundation Institute of Christian Culture (Poland) have been part of WCFs since its earliest days. Among WCF European NGO key supporters are Fondazione Novae Terrae (Italy), ProVita (Italy), Georgian Demographic Society (Georgia), In the Name of the Family (Croatia), and the Society and Values Association (Bulgaria). Key Russian foundation and organization funders, all closely tied to the Orthodox Church, are Malofeev’s St. Basil the Great Foundation and Yakunin’s St. Andrew the First Called Foundation (set up in Switzerland), which operates the Sanctity of Motherhood Program, as well as the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute which holds the Rhodes Forum where WCF representatives have spoken. Bulgaria Interview 5; Sven Milekic, “Croatian, Serbian Rightists Join Forces at Family Conference,” *Balkan Insight* (May 25, 2017), <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/25/croatia-serbia-groups-on-controversial-world-family-conference-05-24-2017/>; “From 2013 World Congress of Families,” *Fondazione Novae Terrae* (Accessed July 4, 2021), <https://www.novaeterrae.eu/en/our-network2013.html>; The Observatory on the Universality of Rights, “Rights at Risk: Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2017” (Mar. 22, 2017), 34, https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ours_trends_report_2017_en.pdf; Trimble, “Conceiving a ‘Natural Family’ Order: The World Congress of Families and Transnational Conservative Christian Politics,” 229-31; “St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation (Homepage),” *St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation Website* (Accessed July 4, 2021), <https://en.fap.ru/index.php> (see <https://en.fap.ru/programs/> for The Sanctity of Motherhood Program); DOC Research Institute, “DOC (Dialogue of Civilizations) Research Institute, Events, Rhodes Forum,” *DOC Research Institute Events, Rhodes Forum* (Accessed July 4, 2021), <https://doc-research.org/about-us/> (homepage) and <https://doc-research.org/all-events/> (events Rhodes Forum); World Congress of Families, “World Congress of Families Director Moderates Family Roundtable at World Public Forum’s ‘Dialogue of Civilizations,’” *Cision PR Newswire* (Oct. 7, 2011), <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/world-congress-of-families-director-moderates-family-roundtable-at-world-public-forums-dialogue-of-civilizations-131368433.html>; “Don Feder: The Cultural Roots of Demographic Winter,” *Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute YouTube* (Dec. 19, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzgeTRg0iGc>; “Allan Carlson Promotes the Natural Family as an ‘Idea to Fix the World’ to World Leaders at 11th Annual Rhodes

Meeting, World Public Forum, Dialogue of Civilizations Press Release,” *Christian News Wire* (Oct. 13, 2013), <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/4036572970.html>.

¹⁵⁵ Venezuelan Christine Vollmer, a member of the Pontifical Council for the Family and head of the Latin American Alliance for the Family, has spoken at many WCFs. At one WCF, she attributed the approaching “end of European civilization” to “obstinate antifamily policies.” Quoted in Kathryn Joyce, “From the Archive: Missing: The ‘Right’ Babies,” *The Nation* (Feb. 14, 2008), <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/missing-right-babies/>. Theresa Okafor, President of the Foundation for African Cultural Heritage, has also been a fixture. Vicente Segu from Mexico and head of the NGO *Incluyendo Mexico* helped bring the WCF III to Mexico City and arranging its funding. Don Feder, “World Congress of Families V Opens in Three Days Press Release,” *Christian News Wire* (2009), 39, <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/3490411177.html>; World Congress of Families, “World Congress of Families XIII, Verona, Italy | Speakers,” *International Organization for the Family, World Congress of Families* (2019), <https://wcfverona.org/en/speakers/>; Don Feder, “World Congress of Families VII (May 15-18) in Sydney, Australia Press Release” (2013), <http://www.standardnewswire.com/news/126578085.html>; Stoeckl and Uzlaner, “‘The Great Battles Lie Ahead’ Interview with Allan Carlson (in Moscow, Russia and in Verona, Italy).”

¹⁵⁶ Ciobanu, “New World Order: The ‘Natural Family’ Franchise Goes Global.”

¹⁵⁷ For example, past WCF attendees include Russian Duma Parliamentarian Elena Mizulina, former Moldovan President Igor Dodon, former Polish President Lech Kaczynski, Hungary’s President Orbán, Srđan Nogo of the Serbian party Dveri, and Luca Volonte (former Italian Parliamentarian who served on PACE). It is reported that approximately 100 current or former politicians, with more than 69 from Europe, were on the lists of speakers and attendees for the Verona WCF. Hannah Levintova, “The World Congress of Families’ Russian Network,” *Mother Jones* (Feb. 21, 2014), <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/02/world-congress-families-us-evangelical-russia-family-tree/>; World Congress of Families, “XII World Congress of Families Chisinau, 14–16 September, 2018 Program Announcement,” *International Organization for the Family, World Congress of Families* (2018), <http://worldcongress.md/en/home/>; World Congress of Families, “World Congress of Families 2007 Warsaw Poland Website” (2007), <https://www.worldcongress.pl/program.php>; Robert Trait, “Hungary’s Prime Minister Welcomes US ‘Anti-LGBT Hate Group,’” *The Guardian* (May 26, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/26/hungary-lgbt-world-congress-families-viktor-orban>; Don Feder, “International Planning Committee Meets in Moscow to Plan World Congress of Families VIII (September 10-12, 2014)” (Oct. 24, 2013), <http://www.standardnewswire.com/news/319278736.html>; Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 40; Claire Provost and Nandini Archer, “Revealed: Dozens of European Politicians Linked to US Incubator for Extremism,” *OpenDemocracy* (Mar. 27, 2019), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-dozens-of-european-politicians-linked-to-us-incubator-for-extremism/>.

¹⁵⁸ According to Allan Carlson, the 2007 Warsaw WCF was the first time for government sponsorship when the Law and Justice Party (PiS) helped support the WCF. Government sponsorship altered the trajectory for WCF funding as previous WCFs had operated with limited financial resources. Stoeckl and Uzlaner, “‘The Great Battles Lie Ahead’ Interview with Allan Carlson (in Moscow, Russia and in Verona, Italy),” 41.

¹⁵⁹ After Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, the U.S. and EU imposed sanctions on Russia and many Russian individuals, including Konstantin Malofeev and Viktor Yakunin. The Howard Center bowed to pressure and “suspended” the Moscow WCF. Nevertheless, the event went forward in Moscow under a new name, in the same venues, with many of the same participants and still funded principally by Malofeev and Yakunin. J. Lester Feder, “‘Pro-Life Olympics’ to Open Next Week in Moscow Despite American Sponsors’ Official Cancellation,” *BuzzFeed* (Sept. 4, 2014), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/pro-life-olympics-to-open-next-week-in-moscow-despite-amic>.

¹⁶⁰ Stoeckl and Uzlaner, “‘The Great Battles Lie Ahead’ Interview with Allan Carlson (in Moscow, Russia and in Verona, Italy),” 41.

¹⁶¹ *Id.*

¹⁶² “Italian Government Supports World Congress of Homophobic, Sexist and Anti-Abortion Fundamentalists,” *The Humanist* (Mar. 27, 2019), <https://humanists.international/2019/03/italian-government-supports-world-congress-of->

homophobic-sexist-and-anti-abortion-fundamentalists/; Angela Giuffrida, "City of Love? Christian Right Congress in Verona Divides Italy," *The Guardian* (Mar. 19, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/29/city-of-love-christian-right-congress-in-verona-divides-italy-league-extremism>.

¹⁶³ WCF I Prague, Czech Republic 1997; WCF II Geneva, Switzerland, 1999; WCF IV Warsaw, Poland, 2007; WCF V Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009; WCF VI Madrid, Spain, 2012; WCF VII Moscow, Russia, 2014 (suspended).

¹⁶⁴ Kurlantzick, "Tomorrow the World," The Carnegie Endowment explains, "for Carlson, the European Union embodies a strong voice for secularism on cultural and sex issues, and so represents an important target."

¹⁶⁵ See Section "Russia's Influence and Geopolitical Goals" on pages 37-38.

¹⁶⁶ Tom Porter, "The Christian Right Is Looking to Putin's Russia to Save Christianity from the Godless West," *Newsweek* (Sept. 15, 2018), <https://www.newsweek.com/how-evangelicals-are-looking-putins-russia-save-christianity-godless-west-1115164>.

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BASELESS ATTACKS ON THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

“I see danger already in the insidious way in which the Istanbul treaty is formulated...Your families will be torn apart. If you tell your children that men and women are not the same, that’s enough of an excuse to separate you from them. They will take your children away, and they will not tell you where they are, where they were sold, or where they are prisoners. All it will take is a single false accusation. You will no longer be able to determine the sex of your newborn baby by looking at its genitals. Because your children will decide their own sex, you will not even be allowed to give them names. If there is a disagreement between parents and children, the adults will be deported to a concentration camp where they could be executed. Homosexuals will be declared a superior ruling class. Everyone else will be part of the inferior working class with no freedom of speech. People will be inferior to animals that reproduce sexually since the law will not apply to cats, frogs, or insects.”³²⁷

Monsignor Petr Pit’ha referring to the Istanbul Convention on the tenth anniversary of the Czech Republic on September 28, 2018 from the pulpit of St. Vitus Cathedral³²⁸

The opposition’s key basis for opposing the Istanbul Convention arises from the treaty’s definition of “gender.” The convention defines “gender” as “the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.”³²⁹ Based on this definition, the opposition uses simple yet false assertions to foment public rejection of the Istanbul Convention. The opposition incorrectly alleges the convention’s use of “gender” is a covert means to require states to, among others:

1. accept so-called “gender ideology,” further described on pages 68-69;
2. recognize same-sex marriage and LGBTI rights;
3. authorize the creation of a third sex; and
4. indoctrinate schoolchildren to choose their own sex.

The opposition also claims the convention:

5. will destroy the traditional family and the values underpinning it;
6. lower birthrates in each country’s Caucasian majority (i.e., result in a demographic decline);
7. is an EU and CoE effort to undermine states’ sovereignty; and
8. has an undesirable impact on immigration.

Over time, more legalistic but equally false arguments have been alleged in relation to the Istanbul Convention, including that: the convention is not needed because there is no violence against women; countries that have ratified the Istanbul Convention still have violence against women; the cause of violence against women is social pathologies, like drug and alcohol addiction, and; the convention discriminates against men. For example, in Turkey, the Istanbul Convention is portrayed by some as a “monstrosity” designed to shatter the family and promote homosexuality, as well as a European plot to subvert society through women.³³⁰

The convention does none of these things. By pushing false narratives on homosexuality, a third sex, and destruction of the traditional family, some in the opposition exploit beliefs within the region that homosexuality is morally wrong.³³¹ Leveraging homophobic sentiments enables some in the opposition to sway a broad swathe of the population; 71 percent of people in the CEE believe that homosexuality is wrong, an opinion that rises to 81 percent in Eastern Orthodox countries and drops slightly to 59 percent in non-Orthodox countries.³³² There are numerous rumours about the impact of the Istanbul Convention on LGBTI rights. The late Russian Orthodox Archbishop Smirnov stated, “These people [LGBTI] go against God, they are his specific enemies. There is natural sin and there is sin against nature.”³³³ A 2018 poll found that more than 60 percent of Russians believe an international gay global network is conspiring to undermine the country’s traditional values.³³⁴ In Ukraine, the Ivano-Frankivsk Regional Council equates the legalization of LGBTI rights with the destruction of the family.³³⁵ A HRD explained that the Russian Orthodox Church’s role in disparaging LGBTI persons has intensified, with some officials calling gay persons national traitors with lifestyles against traditional family values.³³⁶ Given the pervasive anti-gay attitudes, a Bulgarian HRD conceded the opposition’s anti-gender narrative to be “pure genius” as a tactic.³³⁷

The following section explores misinformation spread regarding the convention. While this report discusses the false narratives individually, in practice, they are often related.

THE “TRADITIONAL FAMILY” AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER

The opposition’s pro-traditional or natural family stance is one of the shrewdest and most misleading messages to discredit the Istanbul Convention. Family is integral to societies, and the rhetoric of some in the opposition has appropriated it and the emotions surrounding it to undermine the Istanbul Convention.

Some in the opposition assert that the family is the natural and fundamental unit of society,³³⁹ endorsed by law and culture.³⁴⁰ These words appear non-threatening, and most people agree on the importance of family. Behind the opposition’s postulation on the family, however, lies a radical agenda. It calls for a dismantling of individual human rights to be replaced by the “rights of the family.” According to this rhetoric, anything that furthers the goal of large procreative families should become the aim of public policy. Conversely, anything perceived as a threat to large, procreative families is to be prohibited with enforcement by the state.

To advance their strategy, the opposition sets up a false dichotomy of “pro-traditional family” vs. “anti-family.” The opposition ignores evidence that shows the destructive toll of domestic violence on family members and society. Stopping domestic violence is key to strong families and a resilient society. Instead, the opposition labels the Istanbul Convention “anti-family,” which, by extension, designates its supporters as anti-family as well.

To support its claims that the Istanbul Convention destroys the traditional family, the opposition distorts the wording of Article 12(1) of the convention, which provides:

Parties shall take the necessary measures to promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behavior of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions, and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men.³⁴¹

The opposition ignores the phrase “based on the idea of the inferiority of women,” which circumscribes the measures to end only a limited set of a society’s prejudices, customs, and traditions. Instead, it misconstrues Article 12 to claim that the traditional model of the family—

“WHEN ARMENIA LEFT THE USSR, [THERE WAS] VAST UPHEAVAL. EVERYTHING TURNED UPSIDE DOWN. THE ONLY THING THAT REMAINED CONSTANT WAS THE FAMILY, AND PEOPLE VALUED THIS — THEIR FAMILY STRUCTURE — SO THIS WAS A VERY WELL-PLANNED PSYCHOLOGICAL ATTACK [AGAINST THE GENDER EQUALITY LAW]. THEY WOULD THREATEN THIS WHOLE SACRED THING, THE FAMILY.”

Armenian HRD³³⁸

a father, mother, and children—is “stereotypical” and thereby prohibited by the convention. By pitting Article 12 against the traditional family, the opposition claims that the Istanbul Convention requires and necessitates the destruction of the traditional family.

The “Traditional Family” of the Opposition

“[T]here should be a husband who is smart, hard-working, a teacher for his children, a wife whom he carries in his arms and who helps him to raise children. There should be as many children as God gives them.”

Archbishop Smirnov³⁴²

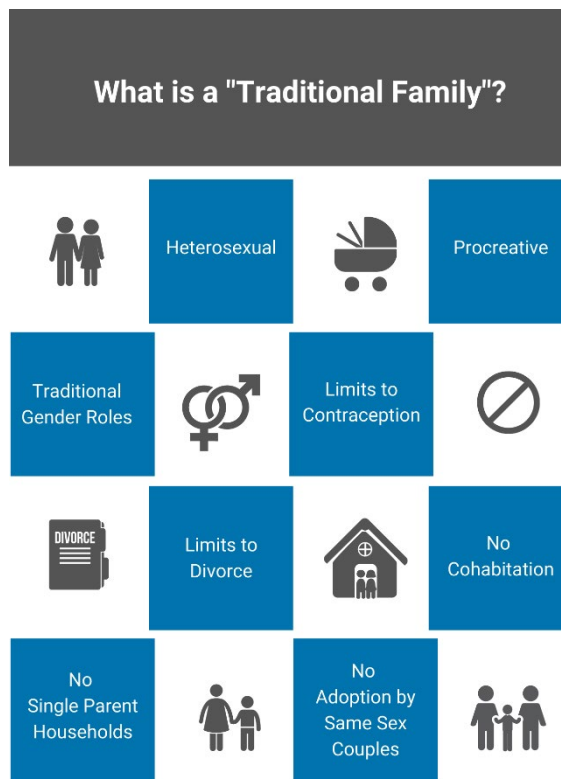
For the opposition, the “natural or traditional family” signifies a heterosexual, procreative marriage. The opposition promotes this concept of the family through legal norms and public policies. Such measures include prohibiting marriage and child adoption by same-sex partners, criminalizing same-sex relations, prohibiting abortions, limiting contraception and divorce, and offering incentives to families to have more children.³⁴³ Many in the opposition disparage any form of family that deviates from its conventional definition, especially single head-of-household families, as well as divorced parents and cohabitating couples.³⁴⁴ According to a Romanian HRD, the conventional definition is one that “focuses on an ancient model of the family.”³⁴⁵

It is important to note the opposition’s traditional family construct impugns women’s rights—including equality between men and women, empowerment of women in the labor market, and SRR. The traditional family movement also supports widespread beliefs that the anti-Istanbul Convention movement is a coordinated effort to subjugate women. A Bulgarian HRD explained that “[opposition] groups are against emancipation of women. Our society is homophobic and sexist. But, of course, such [direct] discourse is not publicly possible. Backlash against the convention is against liberal values. Deep inside, it is anti-women backlash.”³⁴⁶ Dr. Feride Acar, who participated in the drafting of the Istanbul Convention and was GREVIO’s first president, states “the opposition against the Istanbul Convention is triggered by an instinct to protect the patriarchy.”³⁴⁷ Turkish politician Kani Torun similarly perceives that “the conservative men see the convention as a threat to the existing patriarchal structure, and simply do not want to lose the power over women they have traditionally had.”³⁴⁸ The anti-LGBTI narrative is a means of building support from traditional conservatives, but the core tenet of opposing the convention is to sustain an unequal power balance between women and men.³⁴⁹

Statements by the Russian Orthodox Church to save the traditional family from the Istanbul Convention illustrate how the opposition pits women’s rights against the family. The Head of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill is unequivocal that feminism destroys families.³⁵⁰ Patriarch Kirill explains, "Man has his gaze turned outward – he must work, make money – and woman must be focused inwards, where her children are, where her home is." Kirill adds, "If this incredibly important function of women is destroyed, then everything will be destroyed – the family and, if you wish, the motherland."³⁵¹ Archbishop Smirnov, who opposed the Istanbul Convention on the basis that it is against Russia’s “national interests,” advised governments not to permit campaigns against domestic violence.³⁵² Smirnov reasoned that addressing domestic violence would undermine the sacred nature of family life and vilify the family.³⁵³

The U.S. religious right’s view on the traditional family is elaborated by the WCF’s Allan Carlson and Sutherland Institute’s Paul Mero.³⁵⁴ Men are cast as breadwinners, and women as baby makers, homemakers, and caretakers of children.³⁵⁵ According to Carlson, the culture of marriage “encourages young women to grow into wives, homemakers, and mothers. It encourages young men to grow into husbands, homebuilders and fathers.”³⁵⁶ Men—over women—are to be employed outside the home. Indeed, the opposition considers it “a troubling reality behind the fact that women now hold more jobs than men in the U.S. workforce.”³⁵⁷ According to the religious right, marriage can be supported by strengthening the “capacity of lower-educated men to earn a living.”³⁵⁸ Agenda Europe corroborates this view and claims that childrearing demands “one of the parents (usually the mother) to have no or only a part-time job.”³⁵⁹ Carlson and Mero "wholeheartedly" support women’s rights with the qualification that, "Above all, we believe in rights that recognize women’s unique gifts of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding."³⁶⁰ Parallel messages reinforce stereotypical roles by emasculating men who assume homemaker roles. In Croatia, a media campaign suggested “true men” do not wash dishes—a sentiment that one HRD estimated 60 percent of the population shared.³⁶¹

The opposition in Turkey echoes these views concerning the traditional roles of men and women. President Erdoğan has replaced the concept of “gender equality” with what he labels “gender justice.”³⁶² “Gender justice” is framed as a reflection of Turkish national customs and



identity; it is tied to the concept of the complementary, but never equal, nature of the biological sexes where a woman's primary role is to produce and care for children and other family members.³⁶³ "Gender justice" also contrasts with gender equality, a concept portrayed as an erroneous Western idea imposed by those who disregard Turkey's cultural identity.³⁶⁴

The opposition's messages contradict the Istanbul Convention's obligations for States Parties to promote the empowerment and economic independence of women victims of violence.³⁶⁵ For instance, the convention requires States Parties to ensure victims receive assistance in finding employment.³⁶⁶ The opposition, however, spreads the notion that the Istanbul Convention will disrupt the roles of men and women within the family.³⁶⁷ In countries going through economic crises, the implication that women should return to the home grows even stronger.³⁶⁸ As discussed earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities for and violence against women, as well as reinforced expectations for women to resume a homemaker role during such dire times. Under the continuing pandemic, the opposition's calls for women to return to the home may gain even more traction.

As part of its agenda, the opposition touts policies that encourage larger families. Several countries have adopted policies that aim to increase the number of children. In Hungary, the government favors "family-friendly politics," which in practice reinforce traditional family structures. A key aim is to enable women to stay home with their children.³⁶⁹ In Hungary, a state program grants a 10-million Forint (approx. 30,000 Euros) interest-free loan to newly married heterosexual couples. Upon the birth of their first child, the loan is deferred for three years; upon the birth of their second child, the loan is deferred for another three years and reduced by 30 percent; upon the birth of their third child, the loan is forgiven.³⁷⁰ In 2020, Hungary announced free in vitro fertilization as a means of increasing the population.³⁷¹ In Turkey, President Erdoğan declared that Turkey is a country "with great goals" and that "strong families lead to strong nations." According to Erdoğan, strong families require Turkish women to have at least three children.³⁷² Similar to Hungary, Poland's PiS Party launched its Family 500+ program, granting 500 Zloty (approx. 110 Euros) per child per month after the first child to parents and guardians.³⁷³ Poland's law, however, has had the welcome effect of promoting independence for victims of domestic violence to leave abusive situations.³⁷⁴

Policies that increase the number of children without correspondingly protecting women's interests impact women's security in the long term. One HRD expressed caution over government payouts to women who bear children and leave their jobs to raise them. When women stop working, they stop banking their pensions—making them financially vulnerable as they age.³⁷⁵ Economic dependence on violent abusers is a barrier to safety, and economic independence for women victims of violence is a general obligation of States Parties to the

Istanbul Convention.³⁷⁶ Policies like Hungary’s payout program are an example of the broader policies that can indirectly undermine the aims of the Istanbul Convention.

Overall, some opposition members spread fear that the Istanbul Convention will “destroy the institution of the family”³⁷⁷ and threaten marriage.³⁷⁸ The Istanbul Convention is falsely accused of creating mechanisms for “breaking up families and allowing for unjustified removal of children.”³⁷⁹ Nowhere does the treaty provide for such actions, yet some opposition members readily spread this anti-family rhetoric in their own countries. In Turkey, an opposition movement claims the treaty promotes divorce (by women),³⁸⁰ a powerful argument in a country that has proposed a law to reduce women’s ability to leave a marriage by restricting her right to alimony.³⁸¹

Such harmful messaging not only hinders the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, but it also endangers women’s safety and protection. Armenia’s domestic violence law underwent substantial changes before adoption in response to public misperceptions that it would “subvert family values.”³⁸² The revised law shifts the emphasis from best practices for protecting women from violence to “retain(ing) solidarity in the family.” The law fails to criminalize a first instance of domestic violence that results in minor injury and encourages reconciliation between the parties.³⁸³

As with other arguments, the Istanbul Convention’s alleged attacks on the family are baseless. The CoE clarifies:

The objective of the convention is not to regulate family life and/or family structures; likewise, it does not contain a definition of “family,” nor does it promote a particular type of family setting. The convention requires governments to ensure the safety of victims who find themselves at risk at home or are threatened by family members, spouses or intimate partners, which unfortunately is the most common form of violence.³⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the opposition’s family rhetoric still eclipses the CoE’s clarification in many countries. In Croatia, a state official continues to insist that his country’s implementation of the Istanbul Convention is intertwined with the issue of family.³⁸⁵

Demographic Decline

While declining birthrates can pose serious economic, political, and sociological challenges, the religious right seizes on this issue as a threat to Christianity and raises the prospect of human extinction. In *Demographic Winter*, a documentary about the decline of family that features opposition representatives, a spokesperson states, “Today, over 90 countries and territories

have sub-replacement fertility rates, which means that unless something dramatically changes, the entire world population will begin to decline in the lifetime of today's young people. The economic consequences of this decline can only be described as a demographic winter."³⁸⁶

Anything the opposition perceives to hinder a family's procreation, such as women in the workforce, is an existential threat. As stated in *Demographic Winter*: "As education levels for women rose, fertility rates fell. That's because armed with college diplomas, many women chose professional careers over a more traditional family."³⁸⁷ In Croatia, a HRD corroborated this sentiment that women are seen foremost as a "reproductive organ."³⁸⁸ To save the family, the woman must assume her complementary role to the male breadwinner as the homemaker and child caretaker. Building on these fears, the opposition portrays the Istanbul Convention as a threat to the survival of the human race and Christianity, while suppressing women's rights.

The opposition's antidote to demographic winter is the traditional, heterosexual, procreative marriage with many children. This natural family is cast as the key to preventing a future marked by "catastrophic population decline, economic contraction, and human tragedy" brought on by feminism, socialism, and secularism.³⁸⁹ The opposition attacks LGBTI rights as contributors to demographic decline. In Ukraine, the Ivano-Frankivsk regional council challenged same-sex civil unions before the government, claiming they would lower the birth rate and initiate a demographic crisis.³⁹⁰ To prevent demographic decline, the opposition asserts that abortion and contraception should be banned or limited, divorce should not be readily available, and comprehensive sex education should be eliminated. The opposition readily targets the Istanbul Convention as a contributing factor to human extinction.

This demographic decline narrative has a nationalistic and anti-immigrant tone, which aligns with other xenophobic sentiments used to oppose the convention. In *Demographic Winter*, speakers assert that "Western Europe is poised to become a net mortality society."³⁹¹ Allan Carlson describes the Western World as "committing suicide," with Europe and North America in a period of catastrophic demographic failure.³⁹² The message is that Europeans are dying out and being replaced by immigrant cultures. The narrator explains:

The result of massive immigration in Germany, as well as in virtually all rich countries, is that immigrant cultures are projected to become the majority by 2050. Consider how the composition of society would change in the United States over time. By 2050, the vast majority of the United States population will be Hispanic. Already, half of the City Council in Brussels is comprised of recent immigrants or their children. The immigrant population of cities like Rotterdam is 40 percent and the most common boy's name in Amsterdam is Mohamed. Europe's native populations are actually disappearing at astonishing rates.³⁹³

In Hungary, the Deputy Secretary of State for Family proclaimed, “We must solve the demographic [problem] by having children, not by migration.”³⁹⁴ As described on pages 74-76, this pro-Caucasian demographic bias combines with nationalism to generate greater hostility toward the Istanbul Convention.

THE IRRATIONAL THREAT OF “GENDER IDEOLOGY”

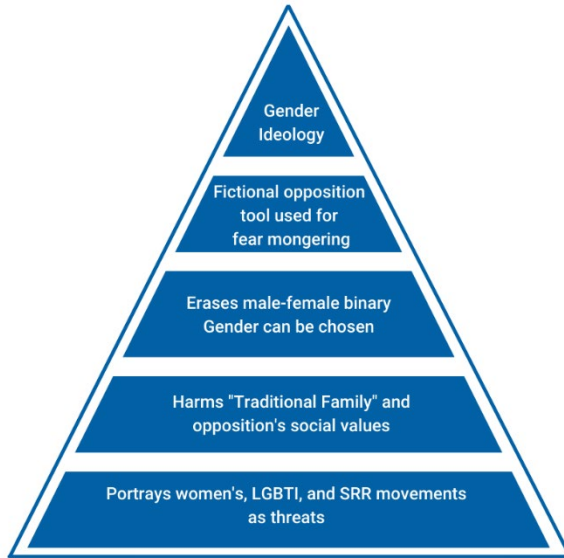
“[T]he main legal mechanism for implementing gender ideology is the Istanbul Convention.”

Ukrainian opposition NGO All Together³⁹⁵

The term “gender ideology” originated within the Catholic Church to describe opposition to the SRRs recognized as human rights.³⁹⁶ Today, gender ideology is a fear-inspiring propaganda tool without concrete definition. Religious fundamentalists and politicians tend to use “gender ideology” to describe issues they oppose, such as: homosexuality and legalizing same-sex relations, marriage, and adoption; abortion; contraception; divorce; sex education; gender mainstreaming, women’s empowerment, and; EU integration. The term is so elastic that it constitutes both a basis for opposing the Istanbul Convention and an offensive tool to attack human rights themselves. Labeling policies as “gender ideology,” a Slovak lawyer noted, immediately “creates fear in the minds of people...”³⁹⁷ Indeed, Polish Bishop Pieronek launched the 2014 (unsuccessful) wave of opposition to the convention by announcing, “the ideology of gender presents a threat worse than Nazism and Communism combined.”³⁹⁸

The opposition frequently refers to the Istanbul Convention as a Trojan Horse to smuggle in gender ideology under the guise of women’s rights.³⁹⁹ Although the aims of the convention are clear, the opposition distracts and redirects attention to gender ideology. For example, Patrik Daniska of Slovakia claims the Istanbul Convention’s goal is not to end violence against women, but rather to promote radical feminism and gender ideology.⁴⁰⁰ Željka Markić of Croatia asserts, “Gender ideology is imposed through this convention that aims to protect women and children.”⁴⁰¹ The Bulgarian Holy Synod similarly claims the use of the word “gender” implies the convention has goals other than protecting women from violence.⁴⁰² A Hungarian spokesperson for the International Coalition for the Defense of the Family (ICDF), which seeks to defeat EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention, stated:

... this document would not serve as an effective tool in the fight against violence. Rather, it would be an act of creeping legislation to entrap member states to use gender as a legal term in their legislative framework. The stated aim of the convention is to protect women



against violence, but the underlying objective is to promote gender ideology and to undermine the traditional family.⁴⁰³

As discussed earlier, the opposition, including the Holy See and Slovak Bishop Conference, portrays the traditional family as under attack by gender ideology.⁴⁰⁴ In turn, the opposition portrays pro-convention supporters as destructive to the traditional family because the treaty's use of "gender" is

not a male-female binary.⁴⁰⁵ Czech MP Šojdrová falsely claims the treaty's goal to eliminate "stereotypical gender roles based on traditions" will stigmatize marriage.⁴⁰⁶

Gender ideology underpins the calls for non-ratification and even withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in multiple countries. In March 2021 in Turkey, the President's office justified its decree to withdraw from the convention, by claiming it had been "hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality — which is incompatible with Türkiye's social and family values."⁴⁰⁷ In Latvia, religious leaders repeatedly urged the government to reject the convention because it will impose "a project of changing society based on gender ideology."⁴⁰⁸ In May 2019, Polish Deputy Justice Minister Romanowski dismissed the Istanbul Convention as "genderist babble" and called for Poland to withdraw.⁴⁰⁹ Poland's bishops similarly endorsed withdrawal because the convention "introduces gender ideology."⁴¹⁰

The false association of the treaty with gender ideology also prompted demands for changes to the Istanbul Convention's language. On April 24, 2018, 333 NGOs sent a letter opposing the treaty's use of "gender" to the CoE Secretary General. They attempted to refute the Executive Secretary of the Istanbul Convention's claim "that the Istanbul Convention neither forces 'gender ideology' nor mandates education on sexual orientation."⁴¹¹ The NGOs demanded revisions to the Istanbul Convention that would "replace gender and related concepts with equality between men and women." Opposition member Luca Volontè wrote in support of Poland's withdrawal and against the use of "gender" in the convention. He demanded amendments to "delete any ambiguous paragraphs and conclusively transform it into what should have been from 2011, a convention whose only end is combating violence against women and not to destroy societies based on human dignity and the natural family."⁴¹²

Language Confusion

The CoE acknowledges that translations of “gender” and “sex” are misused to incite controversies.⁴¹³ It clarifies that “the convention does not require an adaptation of the national legal systems to incorporate the use of the term “gender” but uses the term to explain the purpose of the measures it asks states to adopt and implement.”⁴¹⁴ Indeed, the Istanbul Convention did not invent the term “gender” or “gender-based violence against women.” These terms were already included in earlier treaties ratified by the relevant countries and in CoE Recommendations. Nonetheless, the opposition reinforces false narratives in countries that lack separate terms for “sex” and “gender” and that rely on imperfect interpretations of the convention.

In these countries, the opposition has stigmatized the term “gender” to present it as a harmful concept.⁴¹⁵ A Polish Roman Catholic priest attributed the “devastation of families” to “gender,” and astonishingly, defines “gender” as “radical feminism, which advocates for abortion, the employment of women, and the detention of children in preschools.”⁴¹⁶ Poland’s Minister of Justice specifically criticized the Istanbul Convention because it uses “gender.”⁴¹⁷

The stigma attributed to the word “gender” produces myriad negative consequences. In Bulgaria and Poland, people perceived the word “gender” as a “monster” that would emerge if the treaty were accepted.⁴¹⁸ In Poland, “gender” would “attack traditional Polish families and destroy everything [they] know.”⁴¹⁹ The slogan “gender is not for Ukrainians” is used to foment distrust against the treaty.⁴²⁰ In Ukrainian legislative acts, lawmakers strive to replace the term “gender” with the term “sex-based.”

“Sex” versus “Gender”

Examples from Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, and Poland demonstrate the complications that may arise when a language does not differentiate between “sex” and “gender:”

Bulgaria. The Bulgarian language only has one word to refer to “gender” and “sex” (пол).⁴²¹ While Bulgarians recently imported the English word “gender,”⁴²² the new word is more commonly understood to mean gay or third gender, rather than to refer to one’s social role.⁴²³ Some opponents argue that the CoE’s concept of “gender” conflicts with Bulgarian values.⁴²⁴ The Bulgarian Holy Synod describes “gender” as a “new, different concept, unknown to the Bulgarian legal order and non-existent in the lexicon of the Bulgarian language.”⁴²⁵

Croatia. Because the term “gender,” or “rod,” is not commonly used in Croatia by the general public, the opposition used the Istanbul Convention to alarm communities about “gender ideology” and how the treaty would harm Croatian families.⁴²⁶

Hungary. In Hungarian, the word *nem* can mean “sex” or “gender.” The government has used this translation quirk to oppose the convention, arguing that the treaty’s “gender” clause “conflicts with Hungary’s constitution” because it “denies that there are only two biological genders, male and female.”⁴²⁷ Furthermore, the Hungarian Parliament passed legislation mandating that once a person’s sex is assigned at birth, it cannot be changed on legal documents later.⁴²⁸ The law redefined the word *nem* to “biological sex based on primary sex characteristics and chromosomes.”⁴²⁹

Lithuania. When translated from English to Lithuanian, the term “gender” within the convention becomes “*socialinė lytis*,” meaning “social gender,” as opposed to a definition directly correlating to birth sex.⁴³⁰ According to a Lithuanian HRD, the treaty’s definition has been misunderstood as a threat to Lithuanian traditional values.⁴³¹

Poland. Even in Polish, a language that contains a word for “gender” (*dzender*), the English term is often used instead of the Polish to “reinforce the idea of alien import” and thus “this idea that gender poisons local culture, that it is something from the decadent West.”⁴³²

Homosexuality and the Third Sex

As discussed earlier, the opposition sometimes exploits underlying prejudices against homosexuality. Many in the opposition allege widely that the Istanbul Convention will cause or increase homosexuality.⁴³³ In Croatia, for example, the Istanbul Convention is portrayed as something that can “infect people with” gayness.⁴³⁴ The opposition also claims that the convention will compel nations to recognize same-sex marriage and adoption, which is not accurate. This, they argue, threatens the traditional family, and even humankind, because same-sex partnerships are not biologically procreative.

Various actors in several countries have repeated this falsehood about the convention. In Ukraine, the Council of Churches asserts the Istanbul Convention’s concept of gender will legitimize gay marriages and adoptions.⁴³⁵ The Ukrainian NGO All Together incorrectly claims that the Istanbul Convention will force states to legalize the right to define one’s own gender identity.⁴³⁶ In Bulgaria, the far-right party Bulgarian National Movement issued a statement against ratification of the convention.⁴³⁷ The party inaccurately stated, “In practice, this makes it possible to legalize same-sex marriages – if one of the two married partners in a legally married couple changes their sex, according to the Istanbul Convention, a same-sex family is created.”⁴³⁸

Even more astonishing, the opposition spreads the fallacy that the Istanbul Convention recognizes another sex outside of male and female. This distortion has fueled hysteria that the convention creates a third sex, 34 sexes, or even 117 different sexes.⁴³⁹ These fallacies stoke public misunderstanding about what will happen for countries that ratify the convention. In an extreme example, the opposition has inflamed rumors of the Istanbul Convention’s impact on bathrooms; according to one HRD, the media in Croatia published the opposition’s inventive but false claim that the convention would mandate unisex bathrooms “so old men would look at young girls in bathrooms.”⁴⁴⁰ So pervasive is this bathroom hysteria, the current UN Special Rapporteur for Women Dubravka Šimonovic (Croatia) reported she was asked by her brother, “What’s all this about the Istanbul Convention and bathrooms?”⁴⁴¹

These assertions are not correct and not supportable. After an Armenian opposition member was asked to show where in the treaty “it says a person suddenly becomes homosexual” upon ratification, the vague response was, “Oh, it is not written that way. It is between the lines.”⁴⁴² In another case, a Bulgarian HRD lawyer asked a Ministry of Justice lawyer to show her where the convention supposedly contains 34 sexes. The lawyer’s response was “it is in the surrounding materials.” In actuality, however, none of the convention’s explanatory memoranda or relevant CoE materials make any reference to 34 sexes.⁴⁴³

The opposition also seeds panic by depicting children growing up in non-traditional families as victims who face threats to their healthy development.⁴⁴⁴ This panic fuels rumors that the convention will force children to call their parents “It” or “Parent 1” and “Parent 2.”⁴⁴⁵ As described in the next section, children are a key tool for the opposition to attack the Istanbul Convention.

CHILDREN’S EDUCATION

One of the main tactics of some in the opposition is “weaponizing children against human rights and gender justice.”⁴⁴⁶ It portrays those who protect children as those who also promote the traditional family, champion parental rights above a child’s best interests, and reinforce the gender binary as the norm.⁴⁴⁷ For example, the opposition pits children’s welfare against LGBTI and women’s rights to assert that “LGBT people threaten the innocence and vulnerability of children while feminists are likened to ‘death agents’ in their defense of sexual and reproductive rights.”⁴⁴⁸

The opposition has seized on Article 14 to spread fictions about the corruption of children’s education under the Istanbul Convention. Article 14 requires parties to ensure education on “equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, in all cases adapted to the evolving capacity of learners.”⁴⁴⁹

The opposition claims the convention will abridge the right of parents to raise their children in line with their own values, morals, and religious beliefs.⁴⁵⁰ This deception depicts family and parents as victims of a state that will dismantle the family and remove parents’ authority over their children.⁴⁵¹ Opponents claim:

One of the most important tools used by left-wing ideologues has become the Istanbul Convention which, under the pretext of fighting violence, fights the natural family model and imposes an ideology gender. The convention in fact contains a number of norms that result in the weakening of the natural family model and the imposition of ideological assumptions in the process of implementing its provisions, in particular in the education system.⁴⁵²

As with the term “gender,” the opposition misrepresents the nature of gender education under the Istanbul Convention. In their letter to the CoE Secretary General, 333 NGOs claimed the Istanbul Convention would require school curricula “to reflect [the] understanding of gender as including gender identity and gender expression,”⁴⁵³ which is not accurate. This fiction plays out differently in various countries. For example, in Lithuania and Bulgaria, the backlash against Article 14 misrepresents educational requirements on “non-stereotyped gender roles” as

requiring education on homosexuality and transsexuality.⁴⁵⁴ The Bulgarian party VMRO embellished this claim further and reported that it would impose such education on all students from kindergarten to university.⁴⁵⁵ In Poland and Croatia, the deception focuses on boys dressing as girls, wearing long wigs, and playing with what are traditionally girls' toys.⁴⁵⁶

In addition, the opposition makes assertions about the consequences that gender equality education will have on children. In particular, the opposition emphasizes the corruption of children by so-called ideologies assumed to be part of the gender curriculum.⁴⁵⁷ For example, in Ukraine, regional councils lobbied Parliament against ratification, asserting that the treaty's mandate to teach non-stereotypical gender roles would result in perverted childrearing.⁴⁵⁸ In Lithuania and the Czech Republic, people understood gender-stereotyped curriculum would ban people from identifying as a man or a woman.⁴⁵⁹ In Bulgaria, misunderstandings prevail that gender education will "poison children"⁴⁶⁰ and lead them into same-sex marriages and third genders.⁴⁶¹

In spreading these false ideas, the opposition heavily distorts Article 14, through which the convention's drafters intended to "promote, through the educational sector, values of gender equality, mutual respect and non-violence in interpersonal relationships, non-stereotyped gender roles, the right to personal integrity and awareness about gender-based violence and the need to counter it."⁴⁶² In actuality, Article 14 does not limit the rights of parents to raise their children according to the parents' religious and moral views, force boys to dress a certain way, or require children to choose their own sex.

In at least one country, some opposition forces are seeking to use formal laws to oppose their views of gender ideology. In Romania, the Parliament passed a new law barring educational institutions from activities seeking to "spread gender theory or opinion, understood as the theory or opinion that gender is a concept different from biological sex and that the two do not always match."⁴⁶³ The President did not sign the law but instead sent the law to the Constitutional Court of Romania to determine if it violated free speech.⁴⁶⁴ In December 2020, the Constitutional Court struck down the law.⁴⁶⁵

NATIONALISM: RESISTENCE TO EU AND WESTERN IMPORT

Exploiting strong public sentiments of nationalism is a key strategy of the opposition. Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention requires States Parties to take measures to eradicate prejudices, customs, and traditions "based on the idea of the inferiority of women."⁴⁶⁶ The opposition skews this article as destroying entire national traditions and allowing the CoE to usurp nations' sovereign power. However, Article 12 must be read in the context of the entire treaty in which it appears; it addresses only those cultural or other practices that assume women are inferior to

men or are based on “stereotyped roles for women and men” and only in relation to the treaty’s terms on violence against women and domestic violence.⁴⁶⁷

Moreover, Article 12 is a near replica of Article 5(a) in CEDAW, to which the 14 countries have already agreed:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: (a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.⁴⁶⁸

In its General Recommendation 19, the CEDAW Committee has provided further explanation of Article 5, making clear the focus is on ending violence against women, rather than encroaching on national identities or cultures.⁴⁶⁹ General Recommendation 19 explains that:

[t]raditional attitudes by which women are regarded as subordinate to men or as having stereotyped roles perpetuate widespread practices involving violence or coercion, such as family violence and abuse, forced marriage, dowry deaths, acid attacks and female circumcision. Such prejudices and practices may justify gender-based violence as a form of protection or control of women.⁴⁷⁰

The CEDAW Committee’s interpretation shows that language, such as that in Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention, is aimed at ending behaviors involving violence or coercion against women, not eliminating a country’s cultures and traditions.

Nevertheless, the opposition depicts the Istanbul Convention as an intrusion into the sovereignty of countries.⁴⁷¹ Building on fears of foreign imposition, the opposition frequently portrays the Istanbul Convention as a Western liberal concept.⁴⁷² The Ukrainian Council of Churches, a body that unites 95 percent of the country’s religious organizations, describes the Istanbul Convention as the “evil of gender coming to Ukraine from the West,” “something alien being imposed on Ukraine by Europe,” and “not for Ukrainians.”⁴⁷³

The message that the Istanbul Convention infringes on national autonomy reverberates in several countries. In Poland, the media portrays the Istanbul Convention as restricting Polish sovereignty.⁴⁷⁴ In Bulgaria, the opposition hailed the Constitutional Court decision against the convention as “reasonable cultural identity and a sovereign decision of a nation and its jurisprudence.”⁴⁷⁵ Requests from the international community for Bulgaria to revisit the decision have been perceived as disrespectful of the country’s autonomy.⁴⁷⁶ The opposition

also claims that, by “pushing this convention against their will,” the EU Commission disregards European countries and their people.⁴⁷⁷ Others resent GREVIO, which they see as a “far-reaching monitoring mechanism” that could erode national sovereignty.⁴⁷⁸ This last complaint prevails notwithstanding the fact that these countries have signed other treaties with similar monitoring mechanisms. Furthermore, the European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission) found that GREVIO competencies are not exceptional for an international entity and are actually quite limited.⁴⁷⁹

It is relatively easy for the opposition to manipulate resistance to foreign concepts, capitalizing on nationalism to incite resistance to the Istanbul Convention. Examples in several countries demonstrate how unwelcome outside influence can be. When a Polish lawyer appealed to use the Istanbul Convention in a case, the judge responded there was no need for international ideas as domestic law alone was sufficient.⁴⁸⁰ In Ukraine, the opposition stresses the importance of filtering European concepts and alien instruments, like the Istanbul Convention.⁴⁸¹ In Bulgaria, a common reason for resisting the treaty is the reluctance to accept European influence.⁴⁸² There, as illustrated by social media, the public views the Istanbul Convention as a covert international plot to undermine the country and its population, with one campaign stating:⁴⁸³

They want exactly this. To destroy small nations like Bulgaria and invade them. This is part of a global plan organized by the UN which aims to impose feminism and fool women that they can be independent. This is how they [women] stopped giving birth, and we are the fastest shrinking nation in the world.⁴⁸⁴

By depicting the Istanbul Convention as unwanted European influence, the opposition can vilify the treaty while positioning itself as a defender of the country’s values. A Czech HRD explained that the opposition readily exploits nationalist pride under the ruse of protecting their own people.⁴⁸⁵ A Bulgarian opposition member remarked how Eastern Europeans resist ideologies that force them to unify under “one sort of thinking.”⁴⁸⁶ Politicians also claim that Europe’s progressivism is endangering Ukraine’s traditional moral institutions.⁴⁸⁷ In Belarus, after a law to criminalize domestic violence was proposed, a coalition of religious groups described it as being as bad as the Istanbul Convention.⁴⁸⁸ The President followed suit and labeled the law “Western” rubbish.⁴⁸⁹

ATTACKS ON IMMIGRANT RIGHTS

Anti-immigrant sentiment is another pretext to oppose the Istanbul Convention. The opposition exploits existing hostility toward immigrants, which enables it to coalesce fears of demographic decline, nationalism, and unwanted migration. As former Italian Deputy Prime Minister Salvini

stated, “Migrants—they maintain they come at age 20, they have no past and no future, they are to be manipulated, and this is what they would give to us. Instead, we want to put real money on the table, so that those migrants can remain in their own countries...”⁴⁹⁰ By pitting immigrants against national identity and the traditional family, some in the opposition have fueled antagonism against migrants. A spokesperson stated, “We have to have borders. We have to be a nation, and the fight against our nations holding borders is one that strikes at the very heart. What happens when our countries are overrun is that our families are destroyed.”⁴⁹¹

As described above, anti-immigrant sentiment is closely tied to demographic policies and the fear of human extinction. The opposition observes that population growth is often due to immigration to those countries.⁴⁹² Nationalistic and Islamophobic tones, however, reframe the anti-immigrant argument around protecting culture:

They are going to come in from Muslim countries, from Africa, from Asia... and you are going to end up with a situation of ... potentially an explosive situation ... if they are not assimilated into the culture. You will see certain cultures disappear as well. It's entirely possible that you know that the French, if you use the projections, that the French will disappear, there will be no native-born Frenchmen that come from the traditional, you know, French population.⁴⁹³

The vaunted concern is that Western states’ cultures may be substantially changed in 30 years.⁴⁹⁴ A HRD in Croatia confirmed that public attitudes have changed in recent years to fear that migrants will come and alter the culture of the country.⁴⁹⁵

Hungary has been the most vocal in its position against the Istanbul Convention based on immigration. In November 2017, Prime Minister Orbán stated that Hungary would not ratify the Istanbul Convention because immigrants come from communities that do not respect women, making enforcement of the Istanbul Convention difficult.⁴⁹⁶ This statement was made notwithstanding the Hungarian Ministry of Human Capacities registered 2,067 domestic violence-related calls to its hotline in 2015.⁴⁹⁷ According to Orbán, the migrants immigrating to Europe are “violent and do not respect women,”⁴⁹⁸ and stopping immigration will simply eliminate violence against women.⁴⁹⁹

The opposition also argues that the Istanbul Convention’s provisions are contrary to migration policies. In Hungary, suggestions that the Istanbul Convention will require states to accept more refugees and asylum seekers are common.⁵⁰⁰ The opposition claims Article 60 of the convention on gender-based asylum claims will open the floodgates to a “dramatic increase” in

immigrants migrating westward.⁵⁰¹ The opposition warns that liberal interpretation could grant automatic gender-based asylum to immigrants contradicting Hungary’s “well-established policy of discouraging and putting an end to migration.”⁵⁰² Among the sham statements, Polish Deputy Justice Minister Kaleta asserted that men seeking entry to Europe will claim that they are woman or genderless to invoke the Istanbul Convention and stay in Europe.⁵⁰³

DISINFORMATION

The opposition continues to generate unsubstantiated and misleading claims to discredit and undermine the Istanbul Convention. The chart below lists some of these fictions as well as refutations. The opposition, often with the assistance of lawyers, raises specious objections to the Istanbul Convention and incessantly repeats them as if they were “facts” despite their falsity. As a false message is amplified through social and other media, it frequently takes on a life of its own.

Table G: False and Misleading Claims Regarding the Istanbul Convention

Opposition’s False, Inaccurate, or Misleading Claims	Examples of the Opposition’s Claims	True or False?
There is no need for the convention because there is not much violence against women.	Hungary’s Prime Minister Orbán claims that respect for women is the basis of Hungarian and European culture, and he blames the problem on the incoming migrants who are violent toward women. ⁵⁰⁴ A Romanian HRD explained that the main opposition to the convention argues “there is no violence in the Romanian traditional family.” ⁵⁰⁵	False. This is fiction. No country has eradicated violence against women. It is pervasive in all the reviewed countries and across all areas of society. In the EU region generally, 26 percent of women have had an experience of intimate partner violence and/or non-partner sexual violence. ⁵⁰⁶ For example, in Hungary, between 2000 and 2018, 19 percent of Hungarian women reported intimate partner violence while another 6 percent reported non-partner sexual violence. ⁵⁰⁷ Contrary to the Romanian opposition’s assertion that violence within the family does not exist, 18 percent of women reported a lifetime experience of intimate partner violence. ⁵⁰⁸
Violence against women is caused by “social pathologies.” The problem is not because violence against women is socially, culturally, or religiously tolerated or due to a power imbalance between men and women.	Poland’s Undersecretary of State Romanowski accuses the Istanbul Convention of falsely assuming that “violence against women is socially and culturally determined, is of a structural nature and is a manifestation of the unequal power relationship between women and men over the centuries, which has led to the domination of men over women and the discrimination of the latter.” ⁵⁰⁹ Instead, he attributes the real causes of domestic violence to “social pathologies such as alcoholism, drug addiction, addiction to games, or the sexualization and vulgarization of a woman’s image in the media. The Convention basically ignores these conditions.” ⁵¹⁰	False. Violence against women is about power and control. Violent incidents are not isolated instances of loss of control, or even cyclical expressions of anger and frustration. Rather, each instance is part of a larger pattern of behavior designed to exert and maintain power and control over the victim. The exercise of male violence through which women’s subordinate role and unequal power are enforced and maintained is, in turn, tolerated and reinforced by political and cultural institutions and economic arrangements. ⁵¹¹ Gender inequality and norms on the acceptability of violence against women are a root cause. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified factors specifically associated with intimate partner violence to include:

Opposition’s False, Inaccurate, or Misleading Claims	Examples of the Opposition’s Claims	True or False?
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male controlling behaviors towards their partners; • Past history of exposure to violence; • Marital discord and dissatisfaction; • Ideologies of male sexual entitlement, and; • Weak legal sanctions for violence.⁵¹²
<p>There is no need for the Istanbul Convention because national laws are more than sufficient.</p>	<p>Some of the reviewed countries have made this argument. In Hungary, the opposition alleges that the important provisions of the treaty—protecting children and combating violence against women—are “properly embedded in Hungary’s legal system.”⁵¹³ Ratification is therefore not necessary because Hungarian law adequately protects women from domestic violence.⁵¹⁴ In the Czech Republic, the Minister of Justice Kněžínka and KDU-ČSL Party claim their current legal framework is adequate to address domestic violence.⁵¹⁵ In Lithuania, the Lithuanian Human Rights Association chair opined that Lithuanian legislation sufficiently prohibits violence against women.⁵¹⁶ HRDs in Croatia and Ukraine reported similar rhetoric by the opposition that domestic laws are sufficient to protect women in their countries.⁵¹⁷ Yet those providing direct services to victims stress that laws are not enough.⁵¹⁸</p>	<p>False.</p> <p>The domestic legal framework in the reviewed countries do not effectively address violence against women. For example:</p> <p>Hungary’s criminal law requires the victim to cohabitate or have children with her abuser to prompt prosecution.⁵¹⁹ It also requires at least two separate instances of domestic violence to occur to trigger criminal liability. Public prosecution is unavailable for many smaller criminal offenses, and thus victims must privately prosecute, an action most victims are unwilling to do or lack the resources to do.⁵²⁰</p> <p>The Czech Republic Criminal Code punishes domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, and stalking, yet prosecutors and judges have little expertise in these matters. Criminal processes are not victim-centered and often require victims to recount their testimonies multiple times. The punishments handed down are weak, and prison is ordered in only 50 percent of sentences. Doctors’ offices do not have rape kits available and must refer victims to hospitals, where victims are often told they need a police report to qualify for a rape exam.⁵²¹</p> <p>Lithuania has not trained police and prosecutors on how to enforce the law on marital rape, nor has it implemented effective public information campaigns to change public opinion that sexual violence against a partner should not be criminalized. Victims of domestic violence lack consistent access to civil or criminal protection orders. A civil protection order can only be obtained if a divorce proceeding has been commenced, while criminal protection measures require reporting domestic violence to police to initiate a criminal proceeding. The Criminal Code does not prohibit unwanted stalking.⁵²²</p> <p>In Croatia, dual arrests, where the victim is arrested alongside her violent abuser in domestic violence situations, remains common. Medical certificate requirements, by a doctor, inhibit prosecution of domestic violence offenses. In terms of support services, Croatia lacks a 24/7 hotline available with experts to assist victims of domestic violence. The seven autonomous shelters are funded on a far less secure and sustainable basis than the ten church and state shelters. Yet, autonomous shelters have no referral requirements and allow women and their children to stay up to a year or longer, unlike state-run shelters.⁵²³</p>

Opposition’s False, Inaccurate, or Misleading Claims	Examples of the Opposition’s Claims	True or False?
<p>The Istanbul Convention is ineffective. In countries where it has been ratified, there is still violence against women and domestic violence.</p>	<p>The International Coalition for the Defense of the Family, led by the NGO Ordo Iuris, claims that violence against women remains high in countries that have adopted a gendered approach.⁵²⁴</p>	<p>False attribution of causality. If adoption of a law, in and of itself, were effective to eliminate offenses, then murder, theft, and rape would have disappeared long ago. The phenomenon of violence against women has a long history and is complex. It will not disappear overnight. Interventions for prevention require multiple strategies that challenge social norms that support masculinity based on power and control over women and that condone violence; reform discriminatory family laws; strengthen women’s economic rights; eliminate gender inequalities in access to education and employment; adopt strategies to combat attitudes that justify violence against women; reduce exposure to violence in childhood, and; address substance abuse.⁵²⁵</p>
<p>It was claimed that the convention forbids the celebration of Latvia’s “freedom fighters.”⁵²⁶</p>	<p>This argument was made in the Latvian Parliament.⁵²⁷ The reasoning was that the Istanbul Convention presumes all men are violent, and if the convention prohibits violence against women, then it bans the celebration of the Latvian (all male) freedom fighters who did not shrink from violence to protect the nation.⁵²⁸</p>	<p>False. While the convention acknowledges the data showing that women disproportionately experience violence and that most violence against them is perpetrated by men, it does not state that men are naturally violent against women or that historical events, where men have employed violence to protect a nation, constitute violence against women.</p>
<p>The Istanbul Convention is “discriminatory” against men because it intentionally excludes men from its protections.</p> <p>Poland expands on the idea of discrimination against men. Any organization formed to provide domestic violence or other services to women are, by definition, “discriminatory” because they just provide services to women. In 2016, the Polish government cut funding to NGOs helping women victims of domestic violence on the basis they were discriminatory “since they were providing services only to women.”⁵²⁹</p>	<p>Without substantiation, this argument claims men are victims of violence at the same rate as women.⁵³⁰ Czech MP Tomáš Zdechovský stated: “when it comes to domestic violence, women are just as violent as men, and they tend to use psychological terror instead of physical.”⁵³¹ He further claims the police have told him that “one third of all cases are made-up by women to ensure they’ll get sole custody...”⁵³² Another problem is the convention will affect the divorce process by assuming the certainty of a woman’s innocence and the presumption of a man’s guilt.⁵³³ Such fears have become inflated in other countries. In Poland, a rumour circulated that the Istanbul Convention would require people to record written consent before sexual intercourse, creating risks for men falsely accused of rape.⁵³⁴</p>	<p>False The Istanbul Convention specifically provides that States Parties shall take necessary legislative action to promote and protect the right for everyone, particularly women, to live free of violence.⁵³⁵ While it encourages States Parties to apply its protections to all victims of violence, the CoE intentionally prioritized women and put special emphasis on “all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, which affects women disproportionately,”⁵³⁶ because the data indicates women are disproportionately on the receiving end of all forms of violence, including domestic violence, as well as the fact that certain types of violence inflicted on women can only be experienced because they are women. The CoE explained: The convention applies mostly to women because it covers forms of violence that only women experience because they are women (forced abortion, female genital mutilation), or that women experience much more often than men (sexual violence and rape, stalking, sexual harassment, domestic violence, forced marriage, forced sterilisation). These forms of violence are a result of unequal power relations between men and women and a consequence of discrimination against women.⁵³⁷ The CoE acknowledged that women are not the only ones to suffer from violence and encouraged member states to extend its protections to men, children, and the elderly who suffer from violence covered under the Istanbul Convention.⁵³⁸</p>

Opposition's False, Inaccurate, or Misleading Claims	Examples of the Opposition's Claims	True or False?
<p>The convention considers differences between men and women to be the basic source of violence and therefore undermines the family, which involves the union of a man and a woman.</p>	<p>In Poland, MP Braun asserts the country must return to its roots and tradition, claiming that the Istanbul Convention "stigmatizes the family as such, with the accusing finger, unfortunately the government, points to the family as the motherhouse of evil, a generator of tragedy and not the continuity of tradition."⁵³⁹</p>	<p>False. The convention does not deal with differences between men and women except to the limited extent it notes that: (1) certain types of violence can only be committed against women because they are women (e.g., female genital mutilation); (2) the data shows women suffer disproportionately from violence, and; (3) men commit most of the violence against women. By seeking to prevent violence against women, especially domestic violence, the treaty will strengthen, not weaken, the union between a man and a woman. If immutable differences between men and women were the source of violence against women, there would be no purpose to the Istanbul Convention, which seeks to eliminate violence against women by means of preventive education, protective services, and the prohibition and punishment of violence against women.</p>

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³²⁸ Monsignor Petr Pit'ha has been a Catholic priest since 1969: he was named Chaplain of his Holiness by Pope Francis in 2015. He is also a former Education Minister and a long-time university professor. Hemant Metha, "Czech Priest: Proposed Laws Will Create 'Superior Ruling Class' of Homosexuals," *Friendly Atheist* (Oct. 10, 2018), <https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2018/10/10/czech-priest-proposed-laws-will-create-superior-ruling-class-of-homosexuals/>; Arcibiskupstvı Prařske, PROF. PıřHA JMENOVAN MONSIGNOREM, Nov. 13, 2015, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20151118142820/http://www.apha.cz/prof-pitha-jmenovan-monsignorem>.

³²⁹ Article 3(c), Council of Europe, "The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence."

³³⁰ Emel Altay, "Fighting for Gender Equality: The Istanbul Convention," *Inside Turkey* (Dec. 25, 2019, updated Jan. 6, 2020), <https://insideturkey.news/2019/12/25/fighting-for-gender-equality-the-istanbul-convention/>.

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³³⁷ Bulgaria Interview 2.

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- ⁴⁷⁴ Poland Interview 2.
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⁵⁰⁹ Romanowski, “Statement of Marcin Romanowski, Undersecretary of State to Elżbieta Witek, Marshall of the Sejm (Translated to English),” 1.

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⁵¹¹ The Advocates for Human Rights, “Evolution of Theories of Violence,” *The Advocates for Human Rights, Violence Against Women* (Updated Apr. 2015), https://www.stopvaw.org/evolution_of_theories_of_violence.

⁵¹² World Health Organization, “Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018,” 36.

⁵¹³ Eszter Parkanyi, Hungary, International Coalition for the Defense of the Family, “Stop Gender. Stand for Family Press Conference”

⁵¹⁴ Rita Antoni, “Facts and Misconceptions About the Istanbul Convention,” *Nőkért.hu, Website for the Association of Women (Hungary)* (May 26, 2017), <https://nokert.hu/p-20170526-0202/2021/6/tenyek-es-tevhitiek-az-isztambuli-egyezmenyrol>.

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⁵²⁵ World Health Organization, “Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018,” xvii, 42.

⁵²⁶ Latvia Interview 2.

⁵²⁷ *Id.*

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⁵²⁹ Grzyb, “Violence against Women in Poland—the Politics of Denial,” 35.

⁵³⁰ International Coalition for the Defense of the Family, “Petition against EU Accession to the Istanbul Convention.”

⁵³¹ “MEP Zdechovský: Istanbul Convention Doesn’t Fight Discrimination but Imposes It,” *Remix* (Oct. 25, 2018), <https://rmx.news/article/Istanbul-Convention-doesnt-fight-discrimination-but-imposes-it/>.

⁵³² *Id.*

⁵³³ *Id.*

⁵³⁴ Poland Interview 1.

⁵³⁵ Article 4(1), Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.”

⁵³⁶ Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence;” Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Questions and Answers.”

⁵³⁷ Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Questions and Answers,” 5.

⁵³⁸ *Id.*

⁵³⁹ Sejm Official Record, “Statement of Grzegorz Braun, MP (Translated into English),” *Website of the Sejm, Poland’s Parliament* Agenda Item 4, Meeting No. 11 of the 9th Term (Apr. 29, 2020), https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/transmisja.xsp?documentId=873664B37FC4CEDDC125855800244797&symbol=STE NOGRAM_TRANSMISJA.

KEY OPPOSITION STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

The opposition uses a variety of tools, many of them adopted from the U.S. religious right, to advance their goals. These include political activities, copying opponents' tactics, disparaging adversaries, shrinking the space for civil society, sophisticated messaging, and lawfare. The section below describes these tools in more detail.

AGGRESSIVE POLITICAL ACTION

The opposition uses political action to achieve its goals. This tactic calls for cultivating politicians and political parties across local, national, and international levels. They gain political influence by working in spaces where public policy is made, and binding standards are set. In some cases, opponents have even founded their own political parties.⁵⁴⁰

By the end of the 20th century, the U.S. religious right recognized it was more efficient to block unwanted policies and standards at the international or regional levels than locally or nationally.⁵⁴¹ By working through international bodies, the opposition taps networks, influences standards, and gains access to additional funding sources.⁵⁴² U.S. religious right organizations, like the World Congress of Families,⁵⁴³ United Families International, Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-FAM), and the Alliance Defending Freedom have secured Special Consultative Status at the UN.⁵⁴⁴ At the UN, they have found a common agenda with other allies, including Russia, which has introduced at least four resolutions in support of rigidly defined “family values” and against LGBTI rights in the UN Human Rights Council.⁵⁴⁵ Organizations in Europe have also adopted this strategy.⁵⁴⁶ Ordo Iuris, the Polish lawfare organization, gained consultative status at the UN as well as at EU organizations.⁵⁴⁷ The Alliance Defending Freedom has European affiliates, which have become accredited with pan-European institutions.⁵⁴⁸

Opposition NGOs also work nationally to influence public policy. For example, Ordo Iuris has worked to become a trusted resource for the governing PiS party, and its board members are politically active and hold government positions in Poland.⁵⁴⁹ Three of its board members have



held positions in government, including on the Monitoring Team for Prevention of Domestic Violence,⁵⁵⁰ the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,⁵⁵¹ as Supreme Court acting head to lead the selection process for President of the Court,⁵⁵² and on the Family Life and Family Autonomy Council at the Ministry of Justice.⁵⁵³

Finally, the opposition is aware of the reality of political compromise and the need to aim high should they fall short in their goals. Thus, an overarching principle in its political engagement is to use an aggressive approach with respect to policy objectives regardless of how “unrealistic,” “extremist,” or damaging to pro-Istanbul Convention and women’s rights supporters it may be.⁵⁵⁴

LEARN FROM OPPONENTS

One of their main tactics is to “frame our [the opposition’s] issues in terms of rights.”⁵⁵⁵ This appropriation of human rights language to further the opposition’s own agenda has been effective.⁵⁵⁶ Examples of the rights championed by the opposition include: the “right of fathers to prevent the abortion of their children; the right of parents to be the first educators of their children; the right of children to receive correct information, not propaganda on sodomy.”⁵⁵⁷ Increasingly, the opposition seeks to replace fundamental individual human rights with the so-called “rights of the family.”⁵⁵⁸ For violence against women, this means reprivatizing domestic violence, declassifying it as a significant public issue, and making it once again a private matter to be dealt with within the family. The opposition applies “rights” language to issues indiscriminately and regardless of whether it actually is an established human right. For example, when Poland’s Constitutional Court announced its decision to ban abortions in cases of severe fetus congenital defects,⁵⁵⁹ Ordo Iuris Chairman Kwaśniewski tweeted, “We have raised the banner of human rights very high.”⁵⁶⁰ Another opposition organization in Canada called Choice42 published a YouTube video titled “The Magical Birth Canal.” In the video, a young woman in a pink wig states: “Before the baby – or fetus – is born, it is not a human being, clearly. But as it passes through the birth canal, something amazing happens that transforms it into a person with human rights.”⁵⁶¹ In this example, Choice42 exploits human rights language to make the pro-choice position appear absurd or outrageous.

To the opposition, the Istanbul Convention is a roadblock to achieving these so-called rights.⁵⁶² Through its appropriation of human rights language, the opposition sows confusion and incites scrutiny of those NGOs working to promote the Istanbul Convention.⁵⁶³ In addition, human rights framing helps legitimize the opposition as part of civil society and qualifies them for state consultations with civil society and grants.⁵⁶⁴

In a related vein, the opposition urges followers to “use the weapons of our opponents and turn them against them.”⁵⁶⁵ This strategy positions the opposition as the victims of discrimination who are being deprived of freedom of speech and religion.⁵⁶⁶ The opposition is relentlessly “victimized” by unwanted human rights principles, such as non-discrimination based on sex, race, religion, and sexual orientation.⁵⁶⁷ In Ukraine, when regional councils sought to prohibit equality marches, the Ukrainian Gender Commissioner denied their request on the basis that such a ban would be discriminatory.⁵⁶⁸ The organization countered that the Gender Commissioner was restricting its freedom of speech and opinion,⁵⁶⁹ thereby painting Istanbul Convention supporters as anti-human rights. Pro-Istanbul Convention and women’s rights supporters are cast as intolerant, untrustworthy organizations that advocate for fake human rights, and as discriminatory “oppressors” over the “powerless.”⁵⁷⁰

MEN’S RIGHTS

In line with appropriating human rights and positioning themselves as victims, the opposition also uses men’s rights to oppose the convention. The opposition tells the public the Istanbul Convention only protects women and excludes men from its protections. This assertion is not true. The Council of Europe clarifies that the treaty applies to all victims of domestic violence, and States Parties may extend its protections to anyone who suffers from violence covered under the Istanbul Convention.⁵⁷² Article 2(2) of the convention provides, “[p]arties are encouraged to apply this Convention to all victims of domestic violence.”⁵⁷³ The CoE’s Questions and Answers on the convention reiterates this point: “[m]en also experience some forms of violence covered by the convention, such as domestic violence and forced marriage, although less often and frequently in less severe forms. The convention recognises this and encourages its parties to apply its provisions to all victims of domestic violence.”⁵⁷⁴

The opposition amplifies the myth that men are victims of domestic violence at the same rate as women.⁵⁷⁵ Unsurprisingly, this tactic aligns with Agenda Europe’s strategy to use its enemies’ weapons against them,⁵⁷⁶ including misappropriating the victim status that women’s movements claim. Czech Member of European Parliament (MEP) Zdechovský claims that “when it comes to domestic violence, women are just as violent as men, and they tend to use psychological terror instead of physical abuse.”⁵⁷⁷ Zdechovský is, however, incorrect as women do in fact experience all forms of violence on the basis of their sex at a higher rate than men,

**“SUDDENLY, IT’S NOT OKAY
IN SLOVAKIA TO TALK ONLY
ABOUT WOMEN
EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE.
YOU HAVE TO SAY, “BUT WE
HAVE ALSO THE MEN
[VICTIMS].”**

Slovak HRD⁵⁷¹

including psychological violence. Research shows that men constitute the abusers in 95 percent of domestic violence cases in heterosexual relationships.⁵⁷⁸ The CoE further affirms that:

The convention applies mostly to women because it covers forms of violence that only women experience because they are women (forced abortion, female genital mutilation), or that women experience much more often than men (sexual violence and rape, stalking, sexual harassment, domestic violence, forced marriage, forced sterilisation). These forms of violence are a result of unequal power relations between men and women and a consequence of discrimination against women.⁵⁷⁹

To further attack the Istanbul Convention, the opposition also promotes harmful misperceptions that women abuse the law. An article described Czech MEP Zdechovský's views that "policemen say that one third of all cases are made-up by women to ensure they'll get sole custody... Another serious problem of the Istanbul Convention lies in the fact that the entire divorce process will be affected by the certainty of woman's innocence and also by the presumption of a man's guilt."⁵⁸⁰ Zdechovský voiced fears that an atmosphere similar to the U.S. #MeToo movement could emerge in the Czech environment.⁵⁸¹ Such fears have become wildly inflated in other countries. In Poland, a rumor circulated that the Istanbul Convention would require people to record written consent before sexual intercourse, putting men at risk of false accusations of rape.⁵⁸²

DISPARAGE AND INTIMIDATE OPPONENTS

Conservative forces have sought to undermine those campaigning for ratification of the Istanbul Convention by using personal attacks and targeting NGOs through restrictive laws and smears. Agenda Europe endorses a strategy of maligning and discrediting opponents.⁵⁸³ It is a tactic supercharged by social media where few, if any, meaningful restraints on slanderous attacks currently exist.

HRDs detailed their frustration over the growing and unjustified public distrust of NGOs that has resulted from these attacks.⁵⁸⁴ In Bulgaria, an NGO reported how the media labels them a "Soros-funded organization" and called an employee a transsexual in an attempt to generate public distrust.⁵⁸⁵ In Croatia, women's rights activists are labeled "Yugo-nostalgic" or "extreme-left" and portrayed as a threat to national identity.⁵⁸⁶ In Armenia, activists are "targeted many times as an 'agent of evil' that is breaking up families, a 'Soros agent' . . . [w]e are attacked verbally all the time, called vulgar feminists, all sorts of labels [are] put on us."⁵⁸⁷ Another Armenian HRD explained they are called "homosexuals" and "enem[ies] of the country."⁵⁸⁸ In

Italy, an advocate reported a great deal of hate speech and cyberstalking, especially targeting women, that signals “if you are not staying in your place as a woman, it is dangerous.”⁵⁸⁹

Some attacks have even escalated to threats of personal violence against those who demonstrate support for the convention. A Croatian journalist, also a prominent advocate for the Istanbul Convention, reported receiving death threats against her and her family after hosting a talk show featuring content focusing on women’s rights.⁵⁹⁰ A Bulgarian lawyer, who has aided NGOs in raising awareness about the Istanbul Convention, received threats of rape and violence following interviews in the media about her work.⁵⁹¹ A Croatian human rights lawyer described how the Ministry of Internal Affairs falsely accused her of forging powers of attorney on behalf of clients.⁵⁹² Police supervised her meetings with clients and refused to leave the room when asked.⁵⁹³ In Poland, women’s HRDs have received numerous bomb threats and death threats.⁵⁹⁴ In Armenia, men threatened death, rape, and violence against members of an NGO working to prevent sexual abuse of children.⁵⁹⁵ Instead of holding the offenders accountable, the authorities began investigating the activities of the NGO, including its website, based on misinformation that its work to prevent sexual violence was a guise to spread pornography.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁴⁰ Tranfic, “A War for the Soul of a Nation: Religious Nationalism and Radical Right Mobilization in Contemporary Croatia.”

⁵⁴¹ Butler, “For Faith and Family: Christian Right Advocacy at the United Nations.”

⁵⁴² Agenda Europe, “Restoring the Natural Order: An Agenda for Europe,” 18.

⁵⁴³ “Lobbying for Faith and Family: A Study of Religious NGOs at the United Nations,” 30. In a 1999 speech, Allan Carlson stated, “It is time to bring to the United Nations and to other international settings the shared truth of history... It is time to move this view of the family as the fundamental social unit to the very heart of international deliberations, so that it might guide the creation of laws and public policies in our respective nations.” Quoted in Cole Parke, “Natural Deception: Conned by the World Congress of Families,” *Political Research Associates* (Jan. 21, 2015), <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2015/01/21/natural-deception-conned-by-the-world-congress-of-families>.

⁵⁴⁴ “Lobbying for Faith and Family: A Study of Religious NGOs at the United Nations,” 2-3.

⁵⁴⁵ The Russian resolutions were supported by Christian right organizations at the UN; one resolution passed in 2016.

⁵⁴⁶ Datta, “‘Agenda Europe:’ An Extremist Christian Network in the Heart of Europe.”

⁵⁴⁷ “Ordo Iuris, Who We Are.”

⁵⁴⁸ “ADF International, Who We Are.”

⁵⁴⁹ Szczygiel, “Ordo Iuris Diplomacy Task Force;” “Tymoteusz Zych Ph.D,” *Ordo Iuris*, <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/tymoteusz-zych-ph-d>.

⁵⁵⁰ Kurasinska, “This Ultra-Conservative Institute Has Infiltrated the Polish State, on a Relentless Quest to Ban Abortion.”

⁵⁵¹ Datta, “Modern-Day Crusaders in Europe. Tradition, Family and Property: Analysis of a Transnational, Ultra-Conservative, Catholic-Inspired Influence Network,” 24.

⁵⁵² “New ‘Commissioner’ in the Supreme Court: Aleksander Stępkowski,” *Rule of Law* (May 15, 2020), <https://ruleoflaw.pl/new-commissioner-in-the-supreme-court-aleksander-stepkowski/>; “Who Is Aleksander Stępkowski, the Founder of Ordo Iuris, the New Judge of the Supreme Court,” *POLITYKA.PL* (Feb. 22, 2019),

<https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/spoleczenstwo/1783390,1,kim-jest-aleksander-stepkowski-zalozyciel-ordo-iuris-nowy-sedzia-sn.read>.

⁵⁵³ “Tymoteusz Zych Ph.D.”

⁵⁵⁴ Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 14.

⁵⁵⁵ *Id.* at 16.

⁵⁵⁶ *Id.*; Leda Sutlovic, “The Impact of Neoconservative Activism on Gender Policies and the Women’s Movement in Croatia,” *Gendering Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe* (2019), 40, <https://cps.ceu.edu/publications/books/gendering-democratic-backsliding-central-and-eastern-europe-comparative-agenda>.

⁵⁵⁷ Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 16.

⁵⁵⁸ Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff, “Gender as ‘Ebola from Brussels:’ the Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 4 (2018), <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1356709/FULLTEXT01.pdf>Korolczuk.

⁵⁵⁹ These are situations where, even if the pregnancy goes to the term, the baby may live only for hours or days while often experiencing severe pain. James Shotter and Agata Majos, “Polish Women Count Cost of Tough Abortion Curbs,” *Financial Times* (Mar. 5, 2021), <https://www.ft.com/content/e652266c-81a1-41a7-bf9f-9c015a7c73bd>; Krystyna Kacpura, “Poland’s Highest Court Has Legalised the Torture of Women. We Will Fight Back for Our Rights,” *Euronews* (Oct. 31, 2020), <https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/31/poland-s-highest-court-has-legalised-the-torture-of-women-we-will-fight-back-for-our-right>.

⁵⁶⁰ “Ordo Iuris and Friends: The Games around the Abortion Ban in Poland,” *VSquare.org* (Dec. 11, 2020), <https://vsquare.org/ordo-iuris-and-friends-the-games-around-abortion-ban-in-poland/>. Ordo Iuris had submitted an amicus curiae brief, signed by 31 religious right organizations from around the world urging the court to find abortion unconstitutional. Attesting to the Ordo Iuris’ ubiquitous networks, the journalist investigative site VSquare provides an interactive world map identifying the home of each of the 31 institutions.

⁵⁶¹ “The Magical Birth Canal,” *Choice42* (June 2, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNgwsT295G8>.

⁵⁶² “Ordo Iuris Press Release on the Convention on the Rights of the Family, Including Links to Convention and Related Materials,” *Ordo Iuris* (July 11, 2018), <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/family-and-marriage/convention-rights-family>; Ciobanu, “Poland Begins Push in Region to Replace Istanbul Convention with ‘Family Rights’ Treaty.”

⁵⁶³ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-10, 2019).

⁵⁶⁴ Sutlovic, “The Impact of Neoconservative Activism on Gender Policies and the Women’s Movement in Croatia,” 40.

⁵⁶⁵ Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 14.

⁵⁶⁶ Citing reports of right-wing Observatory on Discrimination and Intolerance against Christians (OIDAC) established by Agenda Europe organizer, Kugler; Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 15.

⁵⁶⁷ Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 15.

⁵⁶⁸ Ukraine Interview 5.

⁵⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁷⁰ Poland Interview 1; Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction.”

⁵⁷¹ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting II (June 2020).

⁵⁷² Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Questions and Answers,” 5.

⁵⁷³ Article 2(2), Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.”

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- ⁵⁷⁴ Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Questions and Answers,” 5.
- ⁵⁷⁵ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting II (June 2020).
- ⁵⁷⁶ Agenda Europe, “Restoring the Natural Order: An Agenda for Europe,” 14.
- ⁵⁷⁷ “MEP Zdechovský: Istanbul Convention Doesn’t Fight Discrimination but Imposes It.”
- ⁵⁷⁸ Joanne Belknap and Heather Melton, “Are Heterosexual Men Also Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse?” (Mar. 2005), <https://vawnet.org/material/are-heterosexual-men-also-victims-intimate-partner-abuse>.
- ⁵⁷⁹ Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Questions and Answers,” 5.
- ⁵⁸⁰ “MEP Zdechovský: Istanbul Convention Doesn’t Fight Discrimination but Imposes It.”
- ⁵⁸¹ *Id.*
- ⁵⁸² Poland Interview 1.
- ⁵⁸³ Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 17.
- ⁵⁸⁴ Poland Interview 1; Human Rights Defenders Questionnaire, ed. The Advocates for Human Rights (July 2019).
- ⁵⁸⁵ Bulgaria Interview 1.
- ⁵⁸⁶ Croatia Interview 7.
- ⁵⁸⁷ Armenia Interview 2.
- ⁵⁸⁸ Armenia Interview 1.
- ⁵⁸⁹ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-10, 2019).
- ⁵⁹⁰ Croatia Interview 35.
- ⁵⁹¹ Bulgaria Interview 1.
- ⁵⁹² Croatia Interview 14.
- ⁵⁹³ *Id.*
- ⁵⁹⁴ Civicus, “‘I Am Not Safe Here:’ Women’s Rights Activists under Attack for Work on Abortion Rights,” *Civicus Monitor Tracking Civic Space* (Apr. 9. 2021) <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/04/09/i-am-not-safe-here-womens-rights-activists-under-attack-work-abortion-rights/>.
- ⁵⁹⁵ The Advocates for Human Rights and Women’s Resource Center Armenia, “Armenia’s Compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Suggested List of Issues.”
- ⁵⁹⁶ *Id.*

RESTRICT SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

The opposition also seeks to restrict space for civil society. Governments, whether acting on their own or spurred by the opposition, employ tactics that limit NGO effectiveness and intimidate or harass civil society. As one Polish HRD explains:

It's actually really easy to finish us off. All you need to do is a control that will be very detailed and will last for a couple of months. All feminist organizations in Poland are small, and if you remove one or two key persons from everyday activities by making her respond to accusations or go to court, it means shutting the works of such organizations for a few months. You can destroy it this way.⁵⁹⁷

As early as 2013, Orbán's government and his Fidesz party started a campaign against human rights NGOs in Hungary.⁵⁹⁸ When a newspaper listed the "Dirty 24," 24 NGOs that had received EEA and Norway Grants, it triggered a government investigation, police raids of two NGOs, the introduction of new standards for charities—which eliminated charity status for many NGOs—and finally, a foreign agent law that required NGOs to report if they received foreign funding of over 7.2 million Forints (approximately 20,127 Euros or \$24,671 USD) and display such information on their materials.⁵⁹⁹

In July 2018, the Hungarian Parliament passed a new law that increased restrictions on citizens' rights of assembly and limited the ability of groups to demonstrate against the government including, for example, regarding ratification of the Istanbul Convention.⁶⁰⁰

Hungary's Foreign Agent Law

The European Commission sued Hungary after it refused to repeal its foreign agent regulations.⁶⁰¹ In June 2020, the ECJ determined that "Hungary's restrictions on the funding of civil organisations by persons established outside that member state do not comply with the [European] Union law," violating various fundamental rights and the restriction against free movement of capital.⁶⁰² Chief of Staff Gulyas stated that the government would comply with the court's decision.⁶⁰³ After repeated calls on Hungary to comply with the ECJ decision, the EU notified the Hungarian Government in February 2021 it would face heavy fines if it did not change its law within two months.⁶⁰⁴ In May 2021, Hungary finally rescinded the law.⁶⁰⁵ At the same time, however, Hungary adopted a new law that requires the State Audit Office to annually report on the financial status of NGOs that "influence the public."⁶⁰⁶ It remains unclear how the new law will be applied.

In 2016, the Polish government defunded the Centre for Women’s Rights, one of the oldest women’s rights organizations in Poland. According to the Ministry of Justice, the Centre was “narrowing down its help to a specific group,” that is, women, who constitute the majority of people experiencing domestic violence.⁶⁰⁷ In providing services to women victims of violence, the government framed the centre’s work as discriminatory for excluding other victims, such as men. The centre applied three times for grants they had previously received from the Ministry of Justice. They were denied each time. The funds were later distributed to Catholic and pro-family groups, evidencing the state’s intention to promote “religious, nationalist, pro-family” policies by supporting certain civil society movements.⁶⁰⁸ According to a Polish HRD, the groups that received the funding had little experience and, in some cases, registered as civil society organizations “just days before the grant application deadline.”⁶⁰⁹

The Polish government has also resorted to intimidation through an audit-like procedure executed by law enforcement. On October 4, 2017, police raided the offices of the Centre for Women’s Rights in several cities and another NGO.⁶¹⁰ “It was very frightening,” recalled a Polish HRD.⁶¹¹ The police seized documents, hard drives, and computers. The authorities justified the raid based on an investigation tied to criminal charges against former Ministry of Justice employees for improper grants. Because the centre was a former grantee, the police claimed they needed to search its documents.⁶¹² Many, however, believe the raids were in retaliation for marching against a proposed abortion ban.⁶¹³ In January 2018, CoE Commissioner for Human Rights Muižnieks warned Poland’s Prime Minister that such actions by the Polish authorities were likely to have a chilling effect on women’s rights NGOs, and Poland should ensure an environment conducive to their operation.⁶¹⁴

Poland has not adopted a foreign agent law, but the state media undermines NGOs critical of PiS policies, which includes pro-Istanbul Convention groups, by asserting that their funding comes from foreign sources.⁶¹⁵ Opposition organizations also reinforce governments’ repressive policies, thus compounding the pressure on NGOs. When women’s rights defender Marta Lempart made a statement claiming Ordo Iuris received financing from the Kremlin, Ordo Iuris brought a lawsuit against her, leading a Polish District Court to issue an injunction against Lempart.⁶¹⁶ Other countries have imposed similar restrictive measures. In August 2020, Belarus introduced new administrative restrictions on civil society, including further tightening of NGO access to foreign funds and the imposition of taxes and fees on certain NGO activities.⁶¹⁷

In Turkey, President Erdoğan and the AK Party also restrict space for civil society, especially women’s rights NGOs. In 2013, the Erdoğan government formed its most prominent conservative women’s NGO, KADEM (*Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği* – Association for Woman and Democracy), to further its agenda and undermine other independent women’s rights NGOs.⁶¹⁸ KADEM, a government-organized NGO, or GONGO, was organized by leading conservative

figures and the women’s branch of the AK Party and is funded by the government.⁶¹⁹ Erdoğan’s daughter Sümeyye Erdoğan is one of KADEM’s founders and its vice president.⁶²⁰ AK Party leaders use KADEM to promote the image of the Turkish woman as “wife and mother, one who is more than willing to fulfill her domestic responsibilities through self-sacrifice without regard to her individuality.”⁶²¹ A founding member of KADEM explains that it will break the monopoly of the women’s movement in Turkey and be the only institution to fulfill the needs of women in Turkey.⁶²²

Turkey’s Nomination to GREVIO

In 2014, the Erdoğan government led the process to nominate a Turkish expert for membership on the Istanbul Convention’s initial GREVIO committee.⁶²³ The Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Policies sought to exclude from the nomination process a group consisting of 88 women’s groups, known as the Platform, that had been active in the development of new domestic violence legislation in Turkey, Law 6284. Eventually, the Ministry relented and allowed their attendance at an initial meeting. At the meeting, the Ministry insisted that only three NGOs would be selected for a committee that would make the nomination, ignoring all suggestions from the Platform.⁶²⁴ When members of the Platform walked out of the meeting in protest, the Ministry nominated three NGOs “with no direct experience or expertise in dealing with domestic violence.”⁶²⁵ Of the three, two were apparent government-operated NGOs (GONGOs).⁶²⁶ The Platform persisted, demanding that Turkey’s nominee fulfil the requirements established by Article 66 of the Istanbul Convention, including that the nominee have the qualifications to substantiate expert status related to violence against women, human rights, gender equality, assistance to and protection of victims, and that the candidate’s selection be transparent and open to competition.⁶²⁷ Their persistence resulted in a government decision to appoint Dr. Feride Acar.⁶²⁸

Women labelled as feminists have been demonized in Turkey. Erdoğan claims feminists have “no relations to our religion and our civilization,”⁶²⁹ are “marginal women,”⁶³⁰ are not mothers,⁶³¹ and are “enemies of the nation.”⁶³² There have been increasing crackdowns against women’s marches, especially annual International Woman’s Day marches, including permit cancellations and police use of tear gas.⁶³³ Some women’s NGOs have been closed by decree or fined.⁶³⁴

⁵⁹⁷ Marianna Szczygielska, Andrea Krzsan, and Conny Roggeband, “‘Good Change’ and Better Activism: Feminist Response to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland,” *Gendering Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. A Comparative Agenda* (Dec. 17 2019), 132, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337972889_Gendering_Democratic_Backsliding_in_Central_and_Eastern_Europe_A_comparative_agenda.

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- ⁵⁹⁸ Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Peto, “The Gendered Modus Operandi of the Illiberal Transformation in Hungary and Poland,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 68(2018), https://www.academia.edu/35957936/The_gendered_modus_operandi_of_the_illiberal_transformation_in_Hungary_and_Poland_Womens_Studies_International_Forum_2017_unpublished_proof_, 166.
- ⁵⁹⁹ Grzebalska and Peto, “The Gendered Modus Operandi of the Illiberal Transformation in Hungary and Poland,” 166.
- ⁶⁰⁰ “Hungary’s New Law Restricting Freedom of Assembly,” *Hungarian Spectrum* (Oct. 2, 2018), <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2018/10/02/hungarys-new-law-restricting-freedom-of-assembly/>.
- ⁶⁰¹ Pablo Gorondi, “Hungary Law on Ngos’ Foreign Funding Found to Break Eu Rules,” *AP* (June 18, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/acb917bd451bc4e6aaa805c43e193ca2>.
- ⁶⁰² “Hungary ‘Broke EU Law with Foreign Funding Rules,’” *BBC News* (June 18, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53093117>.
- ⁶⁰³ Gorondi, “Hungary Law on NGOs’ Foreign Funding Found to Break EU Rules.”
- ⁶⁰⁴ “EU Takes Legal Steps against Hungary over NGO Law,” *DW* (Feb. 18, 2021), <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-takes-legal-steps-against-hungary-over-ngo-law/a-56611879>.
- ⁶⁰⁵ “Hungary: Lexngo Finally Repealed but a New Threat Is on the Horizon,” *Amnesty International Website: News* (May 18, 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/05/hungary-lexngo-finally-repealed-but-a-new-threat-is-on-the-horizon/>.
- ⁶⁰⁶ “Hungary: Lexngo Finally Repealed but a New Threat Is on the Horizon.”
- ⁶⁰⁷ Szczygielska, Krzsan, and Roggeband, “‘Good Change’ and Better Activism: Feminist Response to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland,” 131; Poland Interview 3.
- ⁶⁰⁸ Szczygielska, Krzsan, and Roggeband, “‘Good Change’ and Better Activism: Feminist Response to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland,” 132.
- ⁶⁰⁹ Poland Interview 3.
- ⁶¹⁰ Szczygielska, Krzsan, and Roggeband, “‘Good Change’ and Better Activism: Feminist Response to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland,” 132.
- ⁶¹¹ Poland Interview 3.
- ⁶¹² Id.; Szczygielska, Krzsan, and Roggeband, “‘Good Change’ and Better Activism: Feminist Response to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland,” 132; For general information on the Polish government’s widespread use of audits and similar procedures to intimidate CSOs whose views are not in accord with the ruling PiS party, see Human Rights First, “Poland’s New Front: A Government War against Civil Society,” *Human Rights First* (Aug. 2017), 11-12, <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Poland-Report-August-2017.pdf>.
- ⁶¹³ Szczygielska, Krzsan, and Roggeband, “‘Good Change’ and Better Activism: Feminist Response to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland,” 131-33; Poland Interview 3.
- ⁶¹⁴ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, “Letter to Mateusz Morawiecki, Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland from the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights” (Jan. 19, 2018), <https://rm.coe.int/letter-to-mr-mateusz-morawiecki-prime-minister-of-the-republic-of-pola/1680784182>.
- ⁶¹⁵ Human Rights First, “Poland’s New Front: A Government War against Civil Society,” 4-5.
- ⁶¹⁶ “Lempart Versus Ordo Iuris. The Court Forbade Her to Say That They Are ‘Kremlin-Paid Fundamentalists,’” *GAZETAPL* (May 29, 2020), <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114883,25984701,lempart-kontra-or-do-iuris-sad-zabronil-jej-mowic-ze-to-oplacani.html> (unofficial English translation). The court issued an injunction in favor of Ordo Iuris and against Ms. Lempart while the legal proceedings were still pending. Witold Mrozek, “The Court Forbade Marta Lempart to Say Ordo Iuris Are ‘Kremlin-Paid Fundamentalists,’” *OKO Press* (May 28, 2020), <https://oko.press/sad-zabronil-marcie-lempart-mowic-ze-or-do-iuris-to-oplacani-przez-kreml-fundamentalisci/> (unofficial English translation). See also page 108-09 discussing SLAPPs.
- ⁶¹⁷ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting III (Nov. 2020).

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- ⁶¹⁸ Çağla Diner, “Gender Politics and Gongos in Turkey,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Winter 2018 (Mar. 21, 2018), <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/898/gender-politics-and-gongos-in-turkey>; Ayşe Durakbaşa, “Feminism in Turkey,” *Eurozine* (July 29, 2019), <https://www.eurozine.com/feminism-in-turkey/>.
- ⁶¹⁹ Durakbaşa, “Feminism in Turkey;” Diner, “Gender Politics and GONGOs in Turkey.”
- ⁶²⁰ Diner, “Gender Politics and GONGOs in Turkey.”
- ⁶²¹ Id.
- ⁶²² Durakbaşa, “Feminism in Turkey.”
- ⁶²³ EŞİK- Women’s Platform for Equality, “Feminists Meet Virtually across Borders to Resist the Attacks on the Istanbul Convention,” *EŞİK- Women’s Platform for Equality* (Oct. 15, 2020), <https://esikplatform.net/feminists-meet-virtually-1/>.
- ⁶²⁴ Özlem Altıok and Bihter Somersan, “Building ‘a New Turkey:’ Gender Politics and the Future of Democracy,” *openDemocracy* (Mar. 3, 2015), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/building-new-turkey-gender-politics-and-future-of-democracy/>.
- ⁶²⁵ Altıok and Somersan, “Building ‘a New Turkey:’ Gender Politics and the Future of Democracy.”
- ⁶²⁶ Id. The two GONGOs were KADEM, which was newly formed at that time, and Women Healthcare Professionals Solidarity Association, of which Prime Minister Davutoğlu’s wife was “honorary president.”
- ⁶²⁷ EŞİK- Women’s Platform for Equality, “Feminists Meet Virtually across Borders to Resist the Attacks on the Istanbul Convention;” Article 66(4), Council of Europe, “The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence;” Rule 10, Committee of Ministers Council of Europe, “Resolution Cm/Res(2014)43 on Rules on the Election Procedure of the Members of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Grevio),” (Nov. 19, 2014), https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805c4ba0. The resolution provides, “Each State Party shall ensure that the national selection procedure leading to the nomination of candidates for GREVIO is transparent and open to competition in order to lead to the nomination of the most qualified candidates.” Altıok and Somersan, “Building ‘a New Turkey:’ Gender Politics and the Future of Democracy.”
- ⁶²⁸ EŞİK- Women’s Platform for Equality, “Feminists Meet Virtually across Borders to Resist the Attacks on the Istanbul Convention;” Altıok and Somersan, “Building ‘a New Turkey:’ Gender Politics and the Future of Democracy.” Dr. Acar fulfilled the necessary prerequisites for nomination to GREVIO. She subsequently served as its Chair for three consecutive terms and was awarded the Council of Europe’s Pro Merito Medal. “Prof. Dr. Feride Acar Awarded ‘Pro Merito Medal’ by Council of Europe,” *bianet* (May 18, 2019), <https://m.bianet.org/english/gender/208895-prof-dr-feride-acar-awarded-pro-merito-medal-by-council-of-europe>.
- ⁶²⁹ Kandiyoti, “The Gender Wars in Turkey: A Litmus Test of Democracy?”
- ⁶³⁰ “Turkey’s Erdoğan Says Women Who Reject Motherhood ‘Incomplete.’”
- ⁶³¹ “Turkey President Erdoğan: Women Are Not Equal to Men;” “Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: ‘Women Not Equal to Men,’”
- ⁶³² Cohen, “Turkey’s Islamist President Erdoğan Attacks Women’s Rights Activists as ‘Enemy of the Nation.’”
- ⁶³³ “Turkey Bans Istanbul International Women’s Day Rally for Second Year,” *The New Arab (UK)* (Mar. 8, 2020), <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/3/8/turkey-bans-international-womens-day-rally-in-istanbul>; Kristina Jovanovski, “Protesters: Turkey Not Implementing Laws to Protect Women,” *The Media Line* (Nov. 26, 2019), <https://themedialine.org/people/human-rights/protesters-turkey-not-implementing-laws-to-protect-women/>; “Erdoğan Accuses Women’s March of Disrespecting Islam,” *Reuters* (Mar. 10, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-womens-day-turkey-erdogan/erdogan-accuses-womens-march-of-disrespecting-islam-idUSKBN1QR0JT>; Cohen, “Turkey’s Islamist President Erdoğan Attacks Women’s Rights Activists as ‘Enemy of the Nation;” Uzey Bulut, “Turkey: Women’s Rights Abuses Widespread and Systematic,” *Gatestone Institute, International Policy Council* (Mar. 21, 2019), <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/13911/turkey-women-rights-abuse>; Alev Özkazanç, “The New Episode of Anti-Gender Politics in Turkey,” *Engenderings, LSE (London School of Economics) Blogs* (May 20, 2019), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/05/20/new-episode-anti-gender-turkey/>; “International Women’s Day: Clashes, Coronavirus and Women Prepare to Strike,” *NPR* (March 8, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/08/813477367/international-womens-day-2020-clashes-coronavirus-and-women-prepare-to-strike>.
- ⁶³⁴ “Turkey: Women’s Rights Defenders in the Crosshairs,” *Federation of International Human Rights* (Dec. 12, 2019), <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/turkey-women-s-rights-defenders-in-the-crosshairs>.

MESSAGING AND PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS

WELL-ORGANIZED, SIMPLE, AND EFFECTIVE

Civil society widely agrees that the opposition’s messaging is effective. Several HRDs described the opposition’s messaging as smart, simple, and easy-to-understand.⁶³⁵ Additionally, these groups are “so well-organized and well-funded that they have a ready response and speakers.”⁶³⁶ In contrast, HRDs are “unprepared.”⁶³⁷ A Serbian lawyer explained, “they use language that is non-elite sounding – the common man can understand their message,” whereas “we come across as elite.”⁶³⁸ For example, by focusing on family values, the opposition uses a mainstream term that everyone understands and perceives as positive. As a Russian HRD explained, focusing on family values is an effective marketing strategy to harass women’s rights defenders.⁶³⁹ A Slovak HRD explained how the opposition portrays feminist NGOs as destroying the family and actually creating violence against women by simply raising the issue of domestic violence.⁶⁴⁰

HRDs note the Istanbul Convention is an abstract and unfamiliar concept for many people in the reviewed countries, making it easy for opposition groups to distort the convention’s language and generate alarm about its impacts on their family and country. As one advocate explained, “They can fantasize, make up gross lies. The more it’s ridiculous, the easier it is for the public to be shocked.”⁶⁴¹ Another acknowledged, “They have a lot of emotional strength” around social issues, such as the family or abortion rights.⁶⁴²

In other places, the opposition is playing off existing public sentiment on certain issues. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is leading the charge against the Istanbul Convention. An HRD elaborated on the strength of the anti-Istanbul Convention position, explaining:

The opposition to the Istanbul Convention [in Hungary] is led by the government itself. So, you do not need to think about demonstrations or people taking to the street to protest the Istanbul Convention, as the government has done this job ... there are these special kind of NGOs, sometimes called GONGOs or government-sponsored NGOs. There are many of these in Hungary. They are government funded and organized. They made [anti-Istanbul] statements. But there were no demonstrations. There wasn’t the need.⁶⁴³

Messaging adheres to the key strategies described earlier, e.g., hijack the language of human rights, malign opponents, and be aggressive and even extremist. The messaging is similar across countries, suggesting an intentional strategy of networked groups. HRDs in Croatia and Ukraine confirmed that the opposition shifted messaging tactics in 2016-2017 to instill fear of “gender ideology” by the Istanbul Convention, suggesting a coordinated effort to influence media coverage of the convention across European countries.⁶⁴⁴

The opposition's messaging is designed for impact, but not always accuracy. For civil society, countering the false information with truth is not easy. First, NGOs often lack the resources to marshal data to disprove misinformation. Also, NGOs in each country generally tend to act independently of each other as compared to the opposition. There is no central source of communications that NGOs can tailor to their circumstances as with the transnational networks of the WCF or membership of Agenda Europe. Third, data refuting false information may be dull, unemotional, and unlikely to attract the same attention. When the opposition claims the Istanbul Convention is not needed because violence against women is not a problem, one can assemble evidence refuting it. But unless the NGOs supporting the Istanbul Convention have the resources to turn the data into a gripping, short visual, the chances of it being impactful are lessened.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND TECHNIQUES

The opposition admittedly excels with communication mobilization, especially on social media. A Bulgarian HRD explained, “[d]ifferent internet media started being so hateful, so organized” adding that considerable planning had to go into the coordinated attack on the Istanbul Convention.⁶⁴⁵ The opposition is aided by Russia's sophisticated disinformation and propaganda ecosystem. Russian media and communication channels have penetrated many European reviewed countries, in Russian and the national language.⁶⁴⁶ For example, in the Czech Republic, “The opposition used mainly the ‘pro-Russia’ media and the ‘disinformation’ type of media directed towards specific groups” according to one HRD.⁶⁴⁷

The Church also plays an important role in amplifying the anti-Istanbul Convention message in some countries. Sermons, media communications, organizing efforts, and political influence are tools organized religions deploy in opposing the Istanbul Convention and other women's rights. The Church has its own radio and TV channels, websites, YouTube pages, Twitter accounts, and other social media platforms. It also has a unique channel of communication: messages during religious services or during religious activities. For example, a HRD expressed concern that “religious leaders, like bishops, preach sermons that do not respect the rights of women or refugees.”⁶⁴⁸ How aggressively the anti-Istanbul Convention message is conveyed depends on the religious clergy hierarchy in each country. In Croatia, an interviewee noted that “the Archdiocese in Split has a website, YouTube site, and Facebook page.”⁶⁴⁹ In the last couple of years, there has been a rise in the conservative media, newspaper, and websites portraying simple and hateful positions, such as Dnevno.hr,⁶⁵⁰ Bitno.net,⁶⁵¹ and Narod.Hr.⁶⁵² Content from these portals is further reshared on Facebook by groups and individuals. In countries like Poland, where the Church holds a uniquely powerful place in society and politics, statements by Church hierarchy are themselves news.⁶⁵³ Certain Church representatives have been

unrestrained in their condemnation of the Istanbul Convention, magnifying disinformation about the treaty.⁶⁵⁴

Findings reveal that, when government becomes more authoritarian and populist, it is likely to exercise its power to stifle pro-Istanbul Convention mainstream media coverage. A journalist from mainstream media in Croatia stated, “Freedom of speech exists, but it is only on paper.”⁶⁵⁵ Another mainstream media journalist explained they constantly self-censor.⁶⁵⁶ This self-censorship is driven by fear. A journalist explained:

If you were to do good journalism (in the past), you were protected by your work (quality). If you were doing good stuff, you would not disappear overnight from media. But it changed. Now no one is protected, and journalists only think about how to survive. There are not so many people who would die for journalism. I am not a brave one. I want to stay anonymous. Colleagues all unfortunately agree to this game: to go under the radar and stay silent. Those who dare to speak out, the message that you get is that it is absolutely dangerous and affects you tremendously.⁶⁵⁷

Politicians opposing the Istanbul Convention can easily garner mainstream media coverage by openly opposing, calling for a committee to review, or declaring the convention unconstitutional. A Czech HRD explained how the opposition uses mainstream media by having MPs write opinion pieces against the convention.⁶⁵⁸ When politicians have their own Facebook pages and websites, they can express anti-Istanbul Convention messaging in even more inflammatory terms.

Unless Istanbul Convention supporters can access the same levels of media distribution, their rebuttals are less likely to reach the intended audience. For example, the Croatian national television channel reportedly allotted excessive coverage to Željka Markić of In the Name of the Family, who opposes the convention, while failing to cover those who support the Istanbul Convention.⁶⁵⁹ When an interview was scheduled with the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, a Croatian national, it was not publicized to the same extent as Markić’s appearances.⁶⁶⁰

⁶³⁵ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-10, 2019).

⁶³⁶ Ukraine Interview 4.

⁶³⁷ Id.

⁶³⁸ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-10, 2019).

⁶³⁹ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-10, 2019).

⁶⁴⁰ Id.

⁶⁴¹ Armenia Interview 1.

⁶⁴² Slovakia Interview 2.

⁶⁴³ Hungary Interview 1.

⁶⁴⁴ Croatia Interview 1; Ukraine Interview 3.

⁶⁴⁵ Bulgaria Interview 7.

⁶⁴⁶ See, e.g., Krekó et al., “The Weaponization of Culture: Kremlin’s Traditional Agenda and the Export of Values to Central Europe;” A Minority Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security;” U.S. Department of State, “GEC Special Report: Russia’s Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda,” (Aug. 2020), <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

⁶⁴⁷ Czech Republic Interview 3.

⁶⁴⁸ Croatia Interview 32.

⁶⁴⁹ Croatia Interview 17.

⁶⁵⁰ Dnevno is a web news portal. It is not clear who is sponsoring it from its website. “Dnevno.Hr Web Newsportal in Croatia,” <https://www.dnevno.hr/>.

⁶⁵¹ According to its website, “Religious portal bitno.net is a unique portal in the Croatian language, wider and more diverse than classic religious and cultural portals and deeper and more focused than general news portals. It was launched with the aim of being an everyday online source of current information, important topics and interesting contributions for all those who want to look at the essentials and enrich themselves,” (unofficial translation). “About Us,” *Bitno.net Web Croatian Christian Newsportal*, <https://www.bitno.net/o-nama/>.

⁶⁵² Narod is a news portal established by Željka Markić’s In the Name of the Family. See page 40.

⁶⁵³ Odrowąż-Coates, “Gender Crisis in Poland, Catholic Ideology and the Media,” 30.

⁶⁵⁴ See, e.g., the quote from Monsignor Petr Pit’ha on page 60.

⁶⁵⁵ Croatia Interview 9.

⁶⁵⁶ Croatia Interview 8.

⁶⁵⁷ Id.

⁶⁵⁸ Czech Republic Interview 3.

⁶⁵⁹ Croatia Interview 7.

⁶⁶⁰ Id.

WAGING LAWFARE

One of the weapons the opposition uses to achieve its goals is “lawfare.” Lawfare involves multi-faceted tactics, such as direct legal advocacy on the international and national levels, changing laws through litigation, representing and funding individuals with emblematic cases, training others in litigation techniques and advocacy, commencing lawsuits against individuals and organizations that oppose them to intimidate the opposition, proposing legislation that furthers the opposition’s goals, providing advice on referendums or petition campaigns, and providing the technology platforms to execute these goals.



A Polish women’s rights NGO describes another lawfare measure, the “strategy of legal manipulation,” or “presenting legal analysis of a given issue in a selective manner or with violation of the principles of legal interpretation. The goal is to distort the legal understanding of concepts such as discrimination, freedom of conscience and religion...”⁶⁶¹ This strategy involves appearing as an “expert,” such as a licensed lawyer, but engaging in activities such as: omitting inconvenient rulings; giving incorrect citations for sources, making verification difficult; incorrectly using a dissenting opinion by failing to identify the majority opinion versus the dissenting opinion, or; not specifying the deference to be given to a dissenting opinion, such as whether it was at the highest court level or only a lower level court, or whether the dissent represents an individual’s lone view or a closely divided court.⁶⁶² The legal manipulation strategy makes it difficult and time-consuming for a court or opposing party to analyze their opponents’ submission, decide whether a cited authority actually supports the argument, and evaluate the submission against applicable law. An NGO describes such legal writing as unreliable and failing to observe basic principles of legal argumentation.⁶⁶³ When such legal memoranda are published on a website, it is even more misleading to the general public, which is unlikely to check the information’s validity.

Another lawfare technique is to commence lawsuits against key opponents, even if the likelihood of success on the merits is slim. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are lawsuits targeting those who communicate with the government or speak out on

issues of public interest.⁶⁶⁴ Litigants of SLAPPs usually sue under claims of defamation, though litigants have also sued under claims of interference with contract or economic advantage (in reference to supposedly harming the plaintiff’s business relationship with a third party), intentional infliction of emotional distress, and conspiracy.⁶⁶⁵ It is difficult to officially define a SLAPP case, but an EU-commissioned report lists the following common features: the presence of the “speaker” (e.g., a HRD); public interest in the speaker’s content; the “chilling effect,” such as the intent to intimidate; vertical power relationship between the speaker and the litigant; exaggerated damages claims; and meritless claims.⁶⁶⁶

The purpose of SLAPPs is to intimidate and silence opponents. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders wrote that “these patterns not only endanger the physical integrity and undermine the work of human rights defenders, but also impose a climate of fear and send an intimidating message to society at large.”⁶⁶⁷ Pro-women’s rights and pro-Istanbul Convention NGOs uniformly suffer from a lack of resources. Defending lawsuits requires resources in terms of time, money, and legal counsel—resources many simply do not have. Individuals may be required to testify, and their reputation questioned. They and their families may receive unwanted media attention.⁶⁶⁸

Lawfare Groups

Opposition lawfare organizations skillfully employ the strategies discussed earlier. They frame issues in terms of “rights,” portray Christian traditional families as “victims,” and malign pro-Istanbul Convention supporters. Lawfare groups act as “defenders of the faith” against those who advocate for women’s rights and the Istanbul Convention.⁶⁶⁹ They incessantly repeat the same message regardless of context to reinforce their points. They employ “megaphone” tactics, seeking to be the loudest voice in public discourse, flooding both traditional and social media. Lawfare organizations strive to become recognized, legitimate sources for information that the public trusts and government officials turn to on policy. Holding regular conferences and inviting government officials, commenting on proposed policies, issuing legal memoranda on their websites and sending them to parliamentarians and government officials, arranging education sessions for parliamentarians, and becoming credentialed with international bodies are mechanisms to portray themselves as experts and build trust.

Among the opposition, Ordo Iuris, has commenced several lawsuits against individuals opposing its views, including but not limited to the following examples:⁶⁷⁰

- On March 8, 2021, Ordo Iuris announced a program to defend the “good name of Poland” against LGBTI activists, politicians, and media that allege violations of Poland’s

international obligations, with the intention of suing MEP Sylwia Spurek, MP Małgorzata Prokop-Paczkowska, and the *Daily Mail*.⁶⁷¹

- LGBTI activists created an “Atlas of Hate” of close to 100 municipalities in Poland that have passed anti-LGBTI resolutions, emphasizing the protection of the traditional family and using other coded anti-LGBTI language.⁶⁷² Approximately 30 of these resolutions are based on the Ordo Iuris-sponsored Municipal Charter of Family Rights.⁶⁷³ Several Polish municipalities, with legal assistance from Ordo Iuris, announced lawsuits against those responsible for the Atlas of Hate.
- In April 2021, Ordo Iuris sued Neil Datta of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights for attributing certain activities to Ordo Iuris, including the creation of LGBTI-free zones, decriminalization of domestic violence, and the criminalization of sex education.⁶⁷⁴

CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

There have been several attempts to challenge the Istanbul Convention on constitutional grounds. In Italy and Slovakia, constitutional challenges have not been formally raised, but such concerns have been voiced.⁶⁷⁵ Following ratification, Italy filed a verbal note to the CoE stating it would implement the treaty in line with its constitution. According to senate history, Italy filed the note because the definition of gender was perceived as too broad and vague, in violation of the Italian Constitution.⁶⁷⁶ In Slovakia, former Prime Minister Fico falsely claimed in March 2019 that parts of the Istanbul Convention, such as the allowance of same-sex marriages, could be incompatible with the Slovakian Constitution.⁶⁷⁷ In March 2019, the Slovak Nationalist Party initiated a motion in Parliament to stop ratification of the Istanbul Convention and succeeded with 103 votes for and 30 votes against the motion.⁶⁷⁸ The main objections of the motion included an incorrect belief that the convention was inconsistent with the Slovakian Constitution because it would authorize same-sex marriages.⁶⁷⁹ A similar result occurred during a vote in November 2019 and February 2020.⁶⁸⁰

When Poland signed the convention, it added a declaration stating it “will apply the Convention in accordance with the principles and the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland.”⁶⁸¹ Six countries filed formal objections to this declaration, claiming it constituted a reservation and limited the scope of implementation of the convention.⁶⁸² In Latvia, religious leaders opposing the convention asserted that it contradicts the Latvian Constitution.⁶⁸³ Although the Latvian Constitutional Court agreed to assess whether the convention was compatible with the Latvian Constitution on these grounds, it ultimately ruled that the convention does not contradict anything in the Latvian Constitution.⁶⁸⁴

The following section discusses the Constitutional challenges raised and decided in Armenia, Latvia, and Bulgaria.⁶⁸⁵ In Latvia and Bulgaria, challenges were brought before each nation's highest court⁶⁸⁶ while Armenia referred the question of whether ratification of the convention would violate Armenia's constitution to the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission).⁶⁸⁷ While the opposition was unsuccessful in Latvia and Armenia,⁶⁸⁸ it succeeded in Bulgaria where the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the convention unconstitutional.⁶⁸⁹

Armenia, Bulgaria, and Latvia

Armenia

On January 18, 2018, Armenia signed the Istanbul Convention. On July 25, 2019, Minister of Justice Badasyan requested that the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) opine on whether ratification of the Istanbul Convention would violate Armenia's Constitution.⁶⁹⁰ The Venice Commission found ratification would not contravene Armenia's Constitution.⁶⁹¹ Significantly, the Venice Commission recognized that the Istanbul Convention does not establish new grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity for prohibited discrimination, but instead draws upon other instruments that already establish the prohibition on such grounds by other human rights bodies.⁶⁹²

The jurists looking at the plain wording of the convention, Armenia's Constitution, and other relevant jurisprudence confirm that the opposition's arguments to reject the convention are baseless.

The Venice Commission Decision on Armenia

The Venice Commission examined several questions, including whether the convention: (1) was necessary for Armenia; (2) contained problematic terms and concepts; (3) required specific legislative changes; (4) established a body (GREVIO) with excessive competence; (5) and introduced gender-based asylum.⁶⁹³ The opinion found that the problem of domestic violence is widespread, the Istanbul Convention builds on and adds value to other international instruments on violence against women, and that an adequate domestic legislative framework and international standards are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary.⁶⁹⁴ Significantly, the Venice Commission also addressed the concepts of gender, gender identity, family, marriage, and sexual orientation; it found the Istanbul Convention does not require states to introduce new definitions or legal protections for these concepts, and, importantly, these concepts they do not contradict the Armenian Constitution.⁶⁹⁵ It also found there is no legal obligation on States Parties to legalize same-sex marriage, the treaty does not interfere with parents' rights to educate their children based on their own preferences, and the treaty does not mandate a specific way to

implement the education under Article 14 or the reporting requirements. Finally, the treaty does not require states to abolish professional confidentiality or require an obligation to report.⁶⁹⁶ In response to suggestions that GREVIO competencies would force states to relinquish national sovereignty to that body, the commission found that GREVIO's competences are not exceptional for an international entity and are actually relatively limited.⁶⁹⁷ As to whether the Istanbul Convention requires states to grant asylum based on gender, the Venice Commission found that states may extend gender-based asylum to LGBTI persons, but the treaty's obligations do not extend beyond those stipulated in the European Convention on Human Rights and the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights.⁶⁹⁸

Bulgaria

In February 2018, 75 members of the Bulgarian Parliament, mostly from the ruling GERB party, requested that the Bulgarian Constitutional Court issue an opinion on the constitutionality of the Istanbul Convention.⁶⁹⁹ An LGBTI NGO reported that the Bulgarian Parliament was influenced by public opposition to the convention.⁷⁰⁰ The main fear of several Bulgarian political parties was the alleged recognition of a “third gender,” which prompted the government to refer the matter to the Constitutional Court.⁷⁰¹

Bulgaria

In its ruling, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court agreed with opponents of ratification, stating that the definition of gender as a social construct was contrary to the Bulgarian Constitution and Bulgarian legislation, which defines gender in biological terms, with social roles determined by biology.⁷⁰² Specifically, the Constitutional Court stated that:

“the Constitution and the entire Bulgarian legislation are built on the understanding of the gender binary of the human species. In fact, the Constitution clearly perceives the social dimension of gender in interaction with its biological determination – Article 47(2) of the Basic Law. In this constitutional provision, the biological sex ‘woman’ is linked to the social role ‘mother’ through ‘birth’ and ‘obstetrical care.’ In short, the term ‘gender’ is used by the constitutional legislator as a unity of biological determination and social construct. The social dimension of the Constitution does not create a social gender independent of the biological sex as provided for in the Convention.”⁷⁰³

In an eight-to-four decision, the Constitutional Court declared ratification of the Istanbul Convention to be unconstitutional.⁷⁰⁴ The Constitutional Court stated that “despite its

undoubtedly positive sides, the Convention is internally incoherent, and this contradiction creates a second layer in it, “shifting its meaning beyond its declared aims - protection of women from violence.”⁷⁰⁵ The case appeared to turn on the unofficial translation of the convention and its “flawed language.” In particular, the Bulgarian word for “sex” is used for “gender,” making them indistinguishable.⁷⁰⁶

Four judges dissented from the majority opinion, stating that the majority’s ruling is “ideologically charged, servicing political interests, and succumbing to public opinion and pressure in an unprecedented way.”⁷⁰⁷ In the view of the minority, the Istanbul Convention is in agreement with both the letter and spirit of the Bulgarian Constitution.⁷⁰⁸ A Bulgarian NGO described how one dissenting judge later reflected on the political nature of the decision—i.e., that the majority judges wanted to show support for the ruling political party.⁷⁰⁹

As discussed earlier, the Court’s decision rested on confusion over the term “gender.” It is notable that the Bulgarian Constitutional Court found the Istanbul Convention contains terms and phrases the meaning of which are not clear, precise, or unambiguous. One interviewee suggested that some of the backlash may have been the result of an unprofessional translation; in some instances “gender” was translated as “social sex,” while in others it was translated simply as “sex,” leading to confusion.⁷¹⁰ The VRMO, a far-right party, capitalized on this confusion by asserting that “gender” is a “third sex” where people change their gender, and that children would thereby be able to choose their own sex.⁷¹¹ The widespread concern surrounding the misconceptions ultimately resulted in a legal challenge that effectively prevents Bulgaria’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention.⁷¹²

Latvia

Two of Latvia’s five party ruling coalition, Attīstībai/Par! and New Unity, asserted that Latvia’s Parliament could not address ratification of the Istanbul Convention until it determined whether the convention’s provisions contravened Latvia’s Constitution; they referred the matter to Latvia’s Constitutional Court.⁷¹³ On August 3, 2020, the Constitutional Court initiated the case.⁷¹⁴ On June 4, 2021, it rendered its decision finding that the convention is compatible with Latvia’s Constitution.⁷¹⁵ The CoE explained that the Constitutional Court’s decision, among other things, found that:

the scope of the Istanbul Convention only includes the elimination of violence against women and domestic violence, and that it does not impose the acceptance or introduction of any specific form of marriage or family. Moreover, it adds that gender-based violence is present in Latvia and mostly affects women, therefore, the implementation of special measures in

respect of women is necessary and is aimed at achieving effective equality between men and women.⁷¹⁶

REFERENDA

There have been numerous efforts in several of the reviewed countries to use the democratic tool of referendums. Most opposition referendum efforts, such as in Croatia, Armenia, Georgia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania, have sought to redefine marriage as a union between a man and a woman. In Slovakia, where the Slovakian Constitution bans same-sex marriage, a referendum unsuccessfully sought to prevent same-sex adoption and excuse children from sex education classes if the parents did not agree to their participation.⁷¹⁷

While marriage referendums do not directly deal with the Istanbul Convention, they provide a platform for disseminating pro-traditional family and anti-LGBTI messaging that is also used to oppose the Istanbul Convention. After the organization In the Name of the Family launched a successful referendum to constitutionally define marriage as between a heterosexual couple in Croatia, a second referendum against the Istanbul Convention proved unsuccessful. The petition failed after a state agency determined that only 348,000 signatures were valid, well short of the 375,000 minimum signatures required for validation.⁷¹⁸

In connection with referendums, opposition lawfare organizations schedule “educational” sessions with Parliamentarians and other government officials. In the case of Slovakia, ADF International also petitioned the court to include language in the referendum that would ban same-sex “domestic partnerships,” but the court rejected this request.⁷¹⁹ The opposition mobilized the online CitizenGO petition platform to create a global petition for individuals outside of Slovakia to urge the Slovak people to vote in favor of the referendum.⁷²⁰ Tapping into foreign pressure is a surprising tactic for the opposition that classifies the Istanbul Convention as an invasion of national sovereignty. In any event, the referendum did not pass.

BLOCKING EU RATIFICATION OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

In October 2015, the EU developed a roadmap toward ratification of the Istanbul Convention and signed the treaty on June 13, 2017.⁷²¹ Early concerns of the European Parliament focused on domestic resistance to the treaty, especially its concept of gender.⁷²² Parliamentary rapporteurs found, however, that such concerns were baseless, as the treaty’s aim is to foster respect for women.⁷²³

In 2017, ADF International released a legal memo assailing EU accession to the Istanbul Convention.⁷²⁴ and urging the EU not to ratify.⁷²⁵ In the event of EU accession, ADF International demanded that EU accession remain within its limits of competence and reservations or interpretations of specific texts, including “gender,” be allowed.⁷²⁶ ADF

International urged other states not to sign or ratify the convention and to even withdraw if they had already ratified it.⁷²⁷ As noted earlier, the ECJ was asked to clarify the appropriate legal basis for the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention.⁷²⁸ It held a hearing on this issue on October 6, 2020.⁷²⁹ Recently, the Advocate General issued a nonbinding opinion confirming the legal basis upon which the EU could accede to the Istanbul Convention, but stated his view that the EU could postpone accession until all EU member states agreed.⁷³⁰ Upon seeing the Advocate General's opinion, one women's rights defender lamented that it was not "promising" and "might bring us back to square one."⁷³¹ At the time of publication, the ECJ has not yet issued its decision.

Meanwhile, *Ordo Iuris* mounted a multi-country effort to oppose EU accession to the Istanbul Convention through the International Coalition for the Defense of the Family (ICDF),⁷³² which launched a petition to EU Commission President von der Leyen to urge non-support for EU accession. The petition attacks the treaty as ideological, harmful to the family, and misinformed about violence against women.⁷³³ It states: "the Convention imposes gender ideology on the Member States by abolishing the objective biological notion of sex and replacing it with the concept of gender, understood as a socio-cultural construct, effectively making the use of this ideological concept mandatory at all levels of state policy."⁷³⁴ It instead attributes the causes of violence to family breakdowns and addiction and emphasizes that men can be victims of violence at the same rate as women.⁷³⁵ The ICDF again deploys the national sovereignty argument, asserting that EU ratification will give the treaty primacy over domestic laws, and ratification should be left to each EU Member State.⁷³⁶ As of September 8, 2021, 59,601 people had signed the petition.

URGING WITHDRAWAL FROM THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

Where the opposition has been unsuccessful in its attempt to prevent ratification, the withdrawal strategy allows the opposition to continue its efforts and redirect focus on de-ratification.⁷³⁷ Poland has begun the process to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention⁷³⁸ and had further begun urging its neighbors to withdraw.⁷³⁹ In Slovakia, the debate began in 2020 over whether to revoke its signature to the treaty, given that Parliament has rejected ratification.⁷⁴⁰

Attacks on the Istanbul Convention in Turkey began in June 2020, when President Erdoğan suggested it was possible for Turkey to "annul" its commitment to the Istanbul Convention.⁷⁴¹ This statement encouraged fundamentalist Islamic and nationalistic individuals and parties to step up their criticism of the convention. Their attacks tied the Istanbul Convention to the destruction of the traditional Turkish family,⁷⁴² fostering homosexuality,⁷⁴³ and being a Western invention.⁷⁴⁴ On July 2, 2020, Numan Kurtulmuş, the Vice Chair of Erdoğan's governing AKP party, stated the convention should never have been signed and noted, "Just as [the *Istanbul*

Convention] was duly signed, one can duly withdraw from the convention."⁷⁴⁵ Turkey was on the verge of initiating withdrawal in August 2020, but widespread protests opposing withdrawal forestalled this decision temporarily.⁷⁴⁶ Nevertheless, President Erdoğan signed a decree on March 19, 2021 (officially published on March 20, 2021), withdrawing Turkey from the convention.⁷⁴⁷

REPLACING THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

In 2018, Ordo Iuris launched an initiative to replace the Istanbul Convention with a “Convention on the Rights of the Family.”⁷⁴⁸ The drafters of the draft convention assert that it is needed to counter efforts, like the Istanbul Convention, that weaken the traditional family, marriage, and parenthood.⁷⁴⁹ The drafters claim that “[o]nly by creating an international family protection platform will we be able to successful[ly] defend the family and marriage at the international and national level.”⁷⁵⁰ Ordo Iuris reiterates myths to defend this so-called convention, claiming the family unit is the first defense against violence, versus non-traditional family units, such as single mothers, that are more likely to experience domestic violence.⁷⁵¹ Others in the opposition also spread the disinformation that violence has increased in states implementing the Istanbul Convention.⁷⁵² Thus far, the document has the support of other TFP affiliates,⁷⁵³ the Polish Roman Catholic Church,⁷⁵⁴ and the Polish Government.⁷⁵⁵

Even though it references the Istanbul Convention, many parts of the Convention on the Rights of the Family fail to reflect best practice standards on violence against women. For example, the document shifts the focus from protecting the non-violent parent in violent situations—widely recognized as the best way to protect children in adult domestic violence situations—to the child. The document establishes the “rights” of children to know his or her parents, to be raised by a mother and father, and to have relationships and direct contacts with both parents regularly when separated, except if contrary to the child’s interests.⁷⁵⁶ In contrast, best practice standards suggest protection orders place temporary custody with the non-violent parent.⁷⁵⁷

Above all, the document seeks to replace the individual rights of family members—men, women, and children—to safety, integrity, and life with the rights of the family. Implementation of this document would eviscerate the protections of longstanding instruments that safeguard individual rights, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and CEDAW. Under Article 4 of the document, the government should not interfere if interference means disruption of the family structure, even in instances of violence. In no other circumstance does a social structure prevent justice system intervention to stop or prevent violence. For example, laws do not preclude justice system intervention in violence at a public bar or on the street. The draft document undercuts the goals of the Istanbul Convention and strives to maintain the traditional family structure at the cost of safety to individual family members.



In addition, the Visegrad Four countries—Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia—signed a Declaration Pro Familia on May 13, 2021. On its face, the Declaration Pro Familia promotes the family in the EU. Yet, upon further review, concerns prevail that the declaration is a new tactic by these governments to push a regressive, extreme-right agenda in the EU that will restrict women’s and LGBTI rights and replace “gender mainstreaming” with “family mainstreaming.”⁷⁵⁸ Notably, the Visegrad Four countries signed the Declaration on the same day that Ordo Iuris and partners across Europe commenced a petition against the European Commission’s move to encourage adoption by LGBTI couples across the EU.⁷⁵⁹

⁶⁶¹ The Federation for Women and Family Planning, “Cultural and Religious Counterrevolution—Is Polish Law under the Threat of Christian Fundamentalists’ Ideology?” 12.

⁶⁶² *Id.* at 13.

⁶⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁶⁴ “What Is a Slapp?” (Accessed Jan. 27, 2021), <https://anti-slapp.org/what-is-a-slapp>.

⁶⁶⁵ “Responding to Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs)” (2021), <https://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/responding-strategic-lawsuits-against-public-participation-slapps>.

⁶⁶⁶ Petra Bárd et al., “Ad-Hoc Request: Slapp in the EU Context,” (May 29, 2020), https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/ad-hoc-literature-review-analysis-key-elements-slapp_en.pdf, 12.

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- ⁶⁶⁷ Margaret Sekaggya, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Margaret Sekaggya,” UN Doc. A/HRC/25/55 (Dec. 23, 2013), 10, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/25/55>.
- ⁶⁶⁸ In an openDemocracy seminar in October 2020, the Spanish representative advised that this tactic was increasingly being used to silence opponents of the ultra-fundamentalist and aggressive CitizenGO.
- ⁶⁶⁹ “Feminazis” is a term repeatedly used in a campaign by HazteOir to denigrate NGOs and individuals who support women’s rights and the Istanbul Convention. Rivera, “Unraveling the Anti-Choice Supergroup Agenda Europe in Spain. A Case Study of Citizengo and Hazteoir.”
- ⁶⁷⁰ See, e.g., page 99 describing Ordo Iuris’ lawsuit against Marta Lempart.
- ⁶⁷¹ Ordo Iuris, “Ordo Iuris Protects the Good Name of Poland. Lawsuits against Authors of Defamation and a Report Rectifying Misinformation,” *Ordo Iuris*, <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/international-activity/ordo-iuris-protects-good-name-poland-lawsuits-against-authors-defamation-and>.
- ⁶⁷² Claudia Ciobanu, “Polish Activists Face Legal Action over ‘Atlas of Hate,’” *Balkan Insight* (Mar. 4, 2020), <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/04/polish-activists-face-legal-action-over-atlas-of-hate/>.
- ⁶⁷³ *Id.*
- ⁶⁷⁴ “Neil Datta Misrepresented Ordo Iuris. Brussels Activist Sued,” *Ordo Iuris* (Apr. 14, 2021), <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/international-activity/neil-datta-misrepresented-ordo-iuris-brussels-activist-sued>.
- ⁶⁷⁵ Ordo Iuris and Coalition Internationale Pour la Defense de la Famille, “Stop Gender. Stand for the Family. Petition against EU Accession to the Istanbul Convention,” <https://stopgenderconvention.org/en/>. Patricolo, “Slovakia Again Refuses to Ratify Istanbul Convention.”
- ⁶⁷⁶ Alessandro Fiore, Italy, International Coalition for the Defense of the Family, “Stop Gender. Stand for Family Press Conference.”
- ⁶⁷⁷ Patricolo, “Slovakia Again Refuses to Ratify Istanbul Convention.” The Istanbul Convention does not provide for same-sex marriages. A constitutional amendment in 2014 effectively prohibited same-sex marriage in Slovakia by defining marriage as existing only between a man and a woman. “Slovakia Rejects Istanbul Convention on Women’s Rights for Second Time This Year;” “The Slovak Parliament Rejected the Istanbul Convention,” *Novinite.com Sofia News Agency* (Feb. 26, 2020), <https://www.novinite.com/articles/203342/The+Slovak+Parliament+Rejected+the+Istanbul+Convention>.
- ⁶⁷⁸ Slovakia Interview 1.
- ⁶⁷⁹ “Slovakia Rejects Istanbul Convention on Women’s Rights for Second Time This Year;” Patricolo, “Slovakia Again Refuses to Ratify Istanbul Convention.”
- ⁶⁸⁰ Patricolo, “Slovakia Again Refuses to Ratify Istanbul Convention;” “The Slovak Parliament Rejected the Istanbul Convention.”
- ⁶⁸¹ Ciaran Burke and Alexandra Molitorisova, “Reservations/Declarations under the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Light of Sex/Gender Constitutional Debates,” *International Human Rights Law Review* (Nov. 30, 2019), 195, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131035-00802002>.
- ⁶⁸² Burke and Molitorisova, “Reservations/Declarations under the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Light of Sex/Gender Constitutional Debates,” 195.
- ⁶⁸³ Klūga, “Latvia Unlikely to Ratify Istanbul Convention Any Time Soon.”
- ⁶⁸⁴ Kincis, “Court Says Istanbul Convention Is in Line with Latvian Constitution.”
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FUNDING

The vast available funding and resources for those opposing the Istanbul Convention stands in stark contrast to the chronic underfunding of women’s rights groups. Furthermore, as space for civil society shrinks and governments make decisions about NGOs based on their political support, government funds may favor the opposition, regardless of their experience in providing the services to be funded.

Women’s rights NGOs supporting the Istanbul Convention find themselves at an enormous disadvantage. Many women’s organizations dedicate themselves principally to providing services to women; advocacy for legal reform has been important but is often secondary to their core missions of meeting victims’ needs. Funding is always precarious, and many operate on “shoestring” budgets. Civil society is often highly dependent on grants, which are frequently short-term, for a specific program, or to deliver services. HRDs must scramble to find the human and financial resources to advocate for the Istanbul Convention, stem the flow of fake news, lies, and disinformation generated by the opposition, and combat the opposition’s other attacks on women’s SRR and human rights.

In some cases, women’s NGOs are working within a financial framework that automatically favors other organizations. In countries where religious bodies are part of the opposition, this dynamic can tip the scales in favor of the anti-Istanbul Convention movements. A Moldovan interviewee explained how their laws remove administrative burdens for religious groups but maintain them for NGOs. She explained, “In Moldova, the law of ‘two percent’ allows citizens to redirect two percent of their taxes to a ‘public benefit’ organization of their choice. Religious organizations are automatically considered public benefit organizations, but NGOs have to apply and prove they benefit the public.”⁷⁶⁰ In Moldova where approximately 92 percent of the population are Orthodox,⁷⁶¹ the Orthodox Church lobbies against the Istanbul Convention⁷⁶² while benefitting from an advantageous tax framework. As explained earlier, Churches in the CEE that are strongly anti-Istanbul Convention are able to deploy their resources, including political clout and communication channels, to mobilize opposition by their followers.⁷⁶³

The perilous operating circumstances that confront pro-Istanbul Convention organizations do not seem to afflict NGOs opposing the Istanbul Convention. The opposition engages in what it sees as an existential battle to transform society to which it commits for decades, if not generations. In general, the resources behind the opposition come from bigger movements with a broader agenda to attack the rights described above. Sources include organized religion in some countries, governments, political parties, the U.S. religious right, oligarchs and other wealthy individuals, and possibly indirect Russian sources.⁷⁶⁴

A recent report, *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders Against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009 -2018* (Tip of the Iceberg Report), compiles information on funding for more than 50 opposition actors in Europe over a ten-year timespan.⁷⁶⁵ These funders are divided into four categories of NGOs, foundations, religious groups, and political parties.⁷⁶⁶ The report identifies these actors, their networked relationships with each other, and their tactics, as well as amounts expended to support anti-gender efforts and, in some cases, the precise efforts funded. The report stresses, however, the information provided is merely “the tip of the iceberg.”⁷⁶⁷

Politicians, political parties, and sympathetic government officials who control distribution of funds to NGO service providers and regulate NGOs can also support the opposition to the Istanbul Convention and disadvantage NGOs in favor of ratification. For example, governments opposed to the Istanbul Convention may cease to fund pro-Istanbul Convention organizations that provide services to women and launch intimidating investigations and audits.⁷⁶⁸ To the extent governments make decisions on NGOs based on their ability to deliver voters to the party in power, governments may favor the opposition if they believe it can mobilize supporters to vote.

The opposition also has a powerful ally in Russia. Using a variety of proxies, including: the Russian Orthodox Church; cultural foundations like Russkiy Mir; oligarchs, and their think tanks and foundations; and control over the traditional social media channels of communication, Russia amplifies anti-LGBTI, anti-Istanbul Convention, anti-women’s equality, and pro-patriarchal traditional family messaging.⁷⁶⁹ Russia also supports nationalistic political parties that will oppose the Istanbul Convention, SRR, and embrace the patriarchal far-right version of the “traditional” family.⁷⁷⁰ In Ukraine, for example, Russia is identified as a source of funding for the anti-Istanbul opposition by HRDs.⁷⁷¹ In Armenia, a HRD repeated her belief that “Putin’s Russia has entities that funnel money into organizations in ex-Soviet countries to combat EU values, fight EU regulations, as all these human rights issues are ‘infiltrating’ these former Soviet republics.”⁷⁷²

The opposition networks also count among their ranks wealthy individuals from various countries, or in the case of Russia, oligarchs willing to act as proxies.⁷⁷³

EXTENSIVE RESOURCES

Interviewees and experts widely agree the opposition is amply funded. An Armenian HRD stressed the opposition does not appear to have financial constraints, explaining, “They had the funds to print out numerous high-quality posters...and the money to develop and maintain a website (#NoIstanbul) dedicated to just this one issue. This cannot be a true Armenian

grassroots movement. The protests against the Istanbul Convention in Armenia do not have financial issues.”⁷⁷⁴

Combined, opposition members have enormous wealth among them. For example, the WCF’s 29 listed partner organizations, of which at least 60 percent were U.S.-based groups, originally scheduled to be part of the cancelled WCF-Moscow reportedly had a combined total annual budget of approximately \$216 million in 2014.⁷⁷⁵ An examination of available information for a few key opposition actors over the past few years shows the extent of just three actors’ financial resources.

Table H: Chart of Three Opposition NGOs’ Financial Information

Chart of Sample Opposition NGOs’ Financial Information					
Opposition NGO	Donations	Annual Revenue	Money Transferred to EU subsidiaries	Overall Expenses	Lobbying Expenses
ADF	As reported in its US Form 990, \$62,651,682.	\$69,046,656 (2020) ⁷⁷⁶	\$1,656,822 to support operations of four ADF International subsidiaries in Europe (2019) ⁷⁷⁷	\$62,288,221 (2020) ⁷⁷⁸	Brussels office spent 200,000 to 299,000 Euros in lobbying (2018) ⁷⁷⁹
Ordo Iuris	\$10,800,000 (8,800,000 Euros) (2018) ⁷⁸⁰	\$1,740,284 (1,418,885 Euros) (2019) ⁷⁸¹		\$1,608,428 (1,669,830 Euros) (2019) ⁷⁸²	Between 25,000 - 49,999 Euros in lobbying the EU’s Commission and Parliament (2018) ⁷⁸³
CitizenGO	\$2,709,525 million (2019) ⁷⁸⁴				

The opposition re-invests heavily in recruitment to broaden its base of resources and future supporters. For example, ADF operates the Blackstone Legal Fellowship, a summer training internship.⁷⁸⁵ In the past two decades, more than 2,400 law students from 21 countries have completed ADF’s legal fellowship program.⁷⁸⁶ ADF’s roster now includes more than 3,700 affiliated lawyers.⁷⁸⁷ On a smaller scale, Ordo Iuris does the same with its own internship program for young lawyers.⁷⁸⁸ In another example, a Croatian HRD explained how some in the local opposition entices rural youth to disseminate their message.⁷⁸⁹ She described reports that “they bus in youth from rural areas. They sing religious songs and march through town. There is

usually a public speech, and afterwards, the group gets rewarded for their participation by shopping.”⁷⁹⁰

Whatever the actual amounts of funding, it is apparent the opposition’s tremendous wealth and access to resources and funding significantly outpaces that available to Istanbul Convention supporters.

NON-TRANSPARENCY

The opposition appears to strive for non-transparency in funding by design. Far-right organizations in Europe exercise great discretion in disclosing their funding sources. While progressive groups are more forthcoming in disclosing their funding sources, far-right groups instead tend to conceal their funders.⁷⁹¹ Russia’s political networks illustrate one reason these connections are intentionally difficult to expose:

Traceable financial links would inevitably make Moscow’s enterprise less effective: when ostensibly independent political figures call for closer relations with Russia, the removal of sanctions, or criticize the EU and NATO, it legitimizes the Kremlin’s worldview. It is far less effective, from the Kremlin’s point of view, to have such statements come from individuals or organizations known to be on the Kremlin’s payroll.⁷⁹²

Further, each country has its own rules regarding registration and disclosure of financial information of NGOs and for-profit enterprises, disclosure of political lobbying activities and expenses, and possibly other campaign finance regulations.⁷⁹³ The EU also has a voluntary Code of Conduct for lobbying the EU Commission and Parliament and a voluntary transparency register.⁷⁹⁴ The CoE, however, lacks these protections.⁷⁹⁵ In many countries, registration and disclosure of lobbying activities and expenses is either voluntary or not required.⁷⁹⁶ At the EU level, both Ordo Iuris and ADF International have voluntarily registered their EU lobbying activities and disclosed lobbying expenditures. But DHI, CitizenGO, Terrae Novae Foundation, and Agenda Europe have not done so.⁷⁹⁷ In addition, Agenda Europe is not a legal entity, so there are no statutory records that might provide insight into its ownership structure and sources of initial funding. Its tradename “agendaeurope.org” is registered to ADF International’s director of EU relations, Sophia Kuby, while the address of Kuby’s European Dignity Watch (based in Brussels) is listed as the registrant address for the Agenda Europe website.⁷⁹⁸

It is challenging to untangle the relationships within various opposition organizations in different countries. Within the TFP network of “independent” entities, affiliations are not immediately evident. Entities may not use TFP in their names or even advertise affiliation.

Supervisory board members are not necessarily identified, making it difficult to identify members who sit on the boards of multiple entities. Of the TFP members in Austria,⁷⁹⁹ Germany,⁸⁰⁰ and Italy,⁸⁰¹ some use TFP in their name and others do not. Examination of the anti-Istanbul Convention Vigilare Foundation sheds further light on TFP funding and connections. In July 2016, the Polish Father Piotr Skarga Association for Christian Culture (a TFP organization) co-founded an organization with the Croatian NGO Vigilare: the Vigilare Foundation. Its contribution was 5,400 Euros.⁸⁰² If the Vigilare Foundation ceases operation, its assets pass to another TFP organization in The Netherlands, Stichting Civitas Christiana.⁸⁰³ According to Neil Datta, “This whole discovery ... contributes to the creation of a clearer image about TFP’s network and the way in which it works. It is clearly alive and continues to function transnationally. Moreover, its transnational dimension is more important than the members of the network wish to reveal.”⁸⁰⁴

Spending meant to influence political outcomes and where the source of the money is not disclosed is referred to as “dark money.”⁸⁰⁵ The term originally arose to describe money used for certain types of political advocacy in the U.S. where the amount of spending, the identity of the donors, or both is not required to be disclosed.⁸⁰⁶ openDemocracy has tracked the flow of \$280 million of dark money from the U.S. religious right to countries around the world, fueling campaigns against women’s and LGBTI rights.⁸⁰⁷ Of that amount, at least \$50 million of dark money is alleged to have poured into Europe in the last decade.⁸⁰⁸ Dark money and nonprofit financial disclosure tied to political advocacy, including lobbying, is a complicated subject.⁸⁰⁹ In many cases, like the U.S. and Poland, entities that operate as nonprofits and are supported through public donations are generally not required to disclose donor information.⁸¹⁰

To limit disclosure of financial and donor information, the opposition maneuvers through laws that do not always appear particularly robust. Financial information regarding the TFP-affiliated entities, Piotr Skarga Foundation Institute of Social and Religious Education and Piotr Skarga Association for Christian Culture, was unavailable until TFP faced a lawsuit over its assets, because Polish law does not require such disclosure of an entity that is not a for-profit enterprise and is supported by donations.⁸¹¹

In addition, the opposition is deft at scattering costs and donations, which obscures the actual expenses and funding sources. The WCF events are a prototype for this tactic. For each World Congress, the WCF attracts a key funding sponsor(s) to commit to the bulk of the fundraising and organize payment of expenses. Apart from the first congresses, which were funded principally by U.S. Mormon interests,⁸¹² a World Congress is usually held in the country of the key funding sponsor(s).⁸¹³ Because neither contributions nor expenses are centralized in a single legal entity that must report them (such as a U.S. nonprofit like the Howard Center which runs the WCF), they remain unknown. Apart from the first World Congresses, financed

principally by grants from U.S. Mormon nonprofits to the Howard Center,⁸¹⁴ neither the funding nor the expenses incurred for a World Congress are reflected on the financial books and records of the Howard Center.

Further, WCF branding is always used for each World Congress. The WCF prominently appears as a “sponsor” in program materials even though the WCF’s financial contribution to a World Congress may be negligible. This can create the false impression that the WCF (the Howard Center) is behind much of the funding of a World Congress. When the WCF was held in Moldova, the co-sponsor with the World Congress of Families was the First Lady of Moldova’s Foundation. It was reported that one year before the Chisinau World Congress, then President Igor Dodon met the Russian oligarch Konstantine Malofeev and asked him to fund the Congress.⁸¹⁵ Funding for the First Lady of Moldova’s Foundation is “completely nontransparent,” according to Mihai Popsoi at the Washington DC-based Jamestown Foundation.⁸¹⁶ The actual funding source for the World Congress in Moldova remains unknown.

This WCF funding model lends itself to a lack of transparency because neither contributions nor expenses are centralized in a single legal entity that must report them. Different donors may pay for different line items, so there may not be an official single account for a Congress. This funding model is easily replicable for marches, protests, and referendums.

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⁷⁶¹ Pew Research Center, “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” Lipka and Sahgal, “9 Key Findings About Religion and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe.”

⁷⁶² Necsutu, “Moldova Urged to Ratify Istanbul Convention ‘without Delay.’”

⁷⁶³ See the sections Actors from and within Dominant Religions on pages 41-47 and Communication Channels and Techniques on pages 104-105.

⁷⁶⁴ Alina Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horse,” *The Atlantic Council Eurasia Center* (Nov. 15, 2016), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/kremlin-trojan-horses/>.

⁷⁶⁵ Datta, “Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018,” 3.

⁷⁶⁶ *Id.* at 7.

⁷⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁶⁸ Poland Interviews 2, 3; Szczygielska, Krzsan, and Roggeband, “‘Good Change’ and Better Activism: Feminist Response to Backsliding Gender Policies in Poland.” For more information on the number of government actors supporting the opposition, see Datta, “Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018,” 59-66.

⁷⁶⁹ Lutsevych, “Agents of the Russian World Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood,” 24; A Minority Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,” 193-94; Datta, “Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018,” 21-27.

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- ⁷⁷⁰ For example, Russia supports the Freedom Party (Austria), Jobbik (Hungary), Lega (Italy), Front National (France) and AfD (Germany). Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horse;” Alina Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horse 2,” *The Atlantic Council Eurasia Center* (Nov. 2017), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The_Kremlins_Trojan_Horses_2_web_1121.pdf; Alina Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses 3.0,” *The Atlantic Council Eurasia Center* (Dec. 4, 2018), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-kremlins-trojan-horses-3-0/>.
- ⁷⁷¹ Ukraine Interviews 3(1) and 6.
- ⁷⁷² Armenia Interview 2.
- ⁷⁷³ Datta, “Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction,” 24.
- ⁷⁷⁴ Armenia Interview 1.
- ⁷⁷⁵ Human Rights Campaign Foundation, “Exposed: The World Congress of Families: An American Organization Exporting Hate,” (June, 2015), 10, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/exposed-the-world-congress-of-families;> <https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/WorldCongressOfFamilies.pdf>.
- ⁷⁷⁶ Auditors Caplin Crouse LLP, “Americans Defending Freedom 2020 and 2019 Audited Financials,” *Americans Defending Freedom, Who We Are, Financials* (2020), 4, <https://www.adflegal.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Annual%20Report%20-%202020%20and%202019%2C%20June%2030.pdf>.
- ⁷⁷⁷ Alliance Defending Freedom, “Alliance Defending Freedom Form 990 (for Fiscal Year Ending June 2019),” *Alliance Defending Freedom, Who We Are, Financials, IRS Form 990* (2019), <https://www.adflegal.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/990%20Public%20ADF%20June%202019.pdf>.
- ⁷⁷⁸ Id.
- ⁷⁷⁹ European Union, “ADF International EU Transparency Disclosure 2018,” *Europe, EU Transparency Register* (2018), <https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/consultation/displaylobbyist.do?id=69403354038-78>.
- ⁷⁸⁰ Szczygiel, “The Golden Boys of Fatima.”
- ⁷⁸¹ Sylwester Ruskiewicz, “We Know How Much Ordo Iuris Received Donation Money. The Largest Amount Ever,” *Wiadomości* (July 27, 2020), https://translate.googleusercontent.com/translate_c?depth=1&hl=en&prev=search&pto=aue&rurl=translate.google.com&sl=pl&sp=nmt4&u=https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/wiemy-ile-ordo-iuris-otrzymalo-pieniedzy-z-darowizn-najwieksza-kwota-w-historii-6536592695187073a&usg=ALkJrhgQ5CXksXchMsQMppjSNEGg071nWg.
- ⁷⁸² Ruskiewicz, “We Know How Much Ordo Iuris Received Donation Money. The Largest Amount Ever.”
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- ⁷⁸⁷ See Auditors Caplin Crouse LLP, “Alliance Defending Freedom and Affiliates Consolidated Financial Statement with Independent Auditor’s Report, June 30, 2020 and 2019,” *Alliance Defending Freedom, Who We Are, Financials, Audited Financial Statements 2020 and 2019* (2019), <https://www.adflegal.org/about-us/who-we-are/financials>; Claire Provost and Ella Milburn, “Christian ‘Legal Army’ in Hundreds of Court Battles Worldwide,” *OpenDemocracy* (Dec. 13, 2017), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/christian-legal-army-court-battles-worldwide/>; Alliance Defending Freedom, “Who We Are,” *Alliance Defending Freedom* (2021), <https://www.adflegal.org/about-us>.
- ⁷⁸⁸ “Ordo Iuris Internships,” *Ordo Iuris Website* (2021), <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/internships-and-training>.
- ⁷⁸⁹ Croatia Interview 19.
- ⁷⁹⁰ Id.
- ⁷⁹¹ Ciobanu, “New World Order: The ‘Natural Family’ Franchise Goes Global.”
- ⁷⁹² Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horse.”

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- ⁷⁹⁵ “About Lobbying.”
- ⁷⁹⁶ Lobby Europe, “National Lobbying Regulations in EU Member States.”
- ⁷⁹⁷ European Union, “Transparency Register.” It is unsurprising that Agenda Europe is not listed, because it does not appear to be an organization with a juridical identity or legal personality. This is an example of another means to avoid disclosure.
- ⁷⁹⁸ Julia Dauksza, “Ordo Iuris and a Global Web of Ultra-Conservative Organisations,” *VSquare* (May 7, 2021), <https://vsquare.org/ordo-iuris-and-a-global-web-of-ultra-conservative-organisations/>.
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- ⁸⁰² Brakus, “Poland’s Hidden Hand Behind Croatian Catholic Lobby Group.”
- ⁸⁰³ *Id.*
- ⁸⁰⁴ *Id.* These interconnected relationships among the U.S. religious right, Russian individuals and entities, European anti-gender individuals, foundations, entities, and religious-oriented groups are further described in Datta, “Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018.”
- ⁸⁰⁵ Center for Responsive Politics, “Politicians and Elections/Dark Money/Dark Money Basics,” *OpenSecrets.org Center for Responsive Politics* (2021), <https://www.opensecrets.org/dark-money/basics>.
- ⁸⁰⁶ Richard Briffault, “What Is Dark Money? 5 Questions Answered,” *Columbia Law School* (Oct. 29, 2019), <https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/what-dark-money-5-questions-answered>; Center for Responsive Politics, “Politicians and Elections/Dark Money/Dark Money Basics.”
- ⁸⁰⁷ Claire Provost and Nandini Archer, “Revealed: \$280m ‘Dark Money’ Spent by US Christian Right Groups Globally,” *OpenDemocracy* (Oct. 27, 2020), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trump-us-christian-spending-global-revealed/>.
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subject-to-disclosure. For information on EU member states other than Poland, see Lobby Europe, “National Lobbying Regulations in EU Member States.”

⁸¹¹ Szczygiel, “The Golden Boys of Fatima.” The lawsuit was over the finances of the Piotr Skarga Foundation Institute of Christian Culture.

⁸¹² Stoeckl and Uzlaner, “‘The Great Battles Lie Ahead’ Interview with Allan Carlson (in Moscow, Russia and in Verona, Italy),” 40.

⁸¹³ The conclusion that WCFs are held in the country of the leading sponsors (or designated by them) is drawn from reviewing the location of WCFs and their key sponsors, Allan Carlson’s discussion of WCF sponsors, and comparing information about WCF sponsors and reports of their funders. See page 35 that lists WCFs and their locations. Stoeckl and Uzlaner, “‘The Great Battles Lie Ahead’ Interview with Allan Carlson (in Moscow, Russia and in Verona, Italy).” The WCF Congress formula evolved so there would be an “international” committee (including many well-known U.S. religious right institutions and key individual supports of the WCF from around the world) and a “local” committee, comprised of the local sponsors funding and/or providing support such as venues for a Congress. For example, with respect to the 2014 Moscow Conference, which was suspended and then went forward without the official WCF label, see Feder, “International Planning Committee Meets in Moscow to Plan World Congress of Families Viii (Sept. 10-12, 2014).”

⁸¹⁴ See, e.g., Stoeckl and Uzlaner, “‘The Great Battles Lie Ahead’ Interview with Allan Carlson (in Moscow, Russia and in Verona, Italy);” “Howard Center for Family, Religion & Society Form 990s Fiscal Year Ends 2001-2018.”

⁸¹⁵ Madalin Necsutu, “Moldova Hosts the World Congress of Families,” *Balkan Insight* (Sept. 14, 2018), <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/14/moldova-to-host-the-world-congress-of-families-09-13-2018/>; SPLC Hatewatch Staff, “Anti-LGBT Hate Group World Congress of Families to Gather in Moldova This Week, Reveals Details at the Last Second,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (Sept. 12, 2018), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/09/12/anti-lgbt-hate-group-world-congress-families-gather-moldova-week-reveals-details-last>.

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PART II: RECLAIMING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGIES



In the face of tremendous challenges to the Istanbul Convention, civil society has been energetic, creative, and resolute in their efforts to counter the opposition. The Advocates interviewed several members of civil society in the affected countries to learn about the strategies they use to promote the convention and women’s rights more generally.

BE VISIBLE

NGOs acknowledged they enjoy greater success when they have high visibility to the public. While visibility can require more planning for staged events or public displays, it can also be as simple as building recognition of the Istanbul Convention at every opportunity. A Ukrainian NGO staff person explained, “we do all that we can do to mention it in all possible situations and at all possible levels to ensure that all remember and understand that it should be ratified.”⁸¹⁸ Even in front of non-lawmakers, such as police officers or judges, she still uses the opportunity to mention the convention and its provisions to them.⁸¹⁹ A Moldovan HRD explained that when they print leaflets on domestic violence, they add a brief note on the Istanbul Convention at the end so that “people get used [to seeing it].”⁸²⁰

Many organizations have found innovative ways to draw attention to the need for the Istanbul Convention. In Turkey in 2018, an artist created an installation of 440 pairs of shoes on the façade of an Istanbul building to mark the 440 femicides that year.⁸²¹ In Poland, after a ministry employee informed the media of plans to retract Poland’s signature to the Istanbul Convention, women’s NGOs launched a protest.⁸²² A red lightning bolt, which has become Poland’s symbol of women’s rights, was ubiquitous among the protestors who marched after the announcement.⁸²³ One HRD opined these highly visible protests tolled the government’s plans

“WHAT I HAVE SEEN, IT HAS WORKED IN CROATIA AND IN THESE OTHER COUNTRIES, IS A STRONG AND BRAVE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT. IT NEEDS TO BE BIG, AND IT NEEDS TO BE LOUD. IT NEEDS TO BE CLEAR THAT IT IS THERE.”

Croatian HRD⁸¹⁷

to withdraw at the time.⁸²⁴ In Hungary, women's NGOs organized a march through Budapest that ended near Parliament, where actors read the names of victims of domestic violence that year. Representatives of women's organizations also read statements about the state's inadequate response to domestic violence and why Parliament needed to ratify the Istanbul Convention.⁸²⁵



Photo credit: Karmela Segvic

Civil society has long used public protests and marches as a way of being visible. They can work especially well in conservative towns and regions because a march demonstrates to residents that local people care about an issue.⁸²⁶ It is crucial that march organizers plan their advocacy goals prior to the protest to ensure it is not a one-time event but secures a long-term result. Facebook groups, Twitter, and NGO websites can facilitate this advocacy organizing leading up to the event.⁸²⁷ An NGO organized a march on March 8, 2020, with the theme of encouraging Ukraine to ratify the Istanbul Convention.⁸²⁸ Importantly, organizers readied their ask prior to the march by collecting 25,000 petition signatures calling for the government to introduce the Istanbul Convention to the Ukrainian Parliament for ratification. After large turnouts for marches in Kiev and other towns, the Ukrainian President submitted the law to Parliament for a vote, where it passed several committees before the pandemic stalled progress.⁸²⁹

Tips for a Successful March

1. Ensure the march is timely and has the most appropriate theme in light of the surrounding circumstances and time. For example, in 2019-2020, domestic violence was a major issue in Ukrainian news, so ratification of the Istanbul Convention was a timely theme.
2. Engage social media networks to promote the march. The organizers in Ukraine spread word of the march by targeting feminist bloggers who, in turn, persuaded their readers to march.
3. Highlight the stories of individual survivors of domestic violence and publish their stories, anonymous or not, in online and print media with their consent.
4. Use innovative and creative media to draw attention to your message through art, performance, and thought-provoking images.
5. Bring in local, national, and international celebrities to speak at the march, bring increased media coverage, and get the attention of political parties.
6. Work hard to get as much media as possible.⁸³⁰

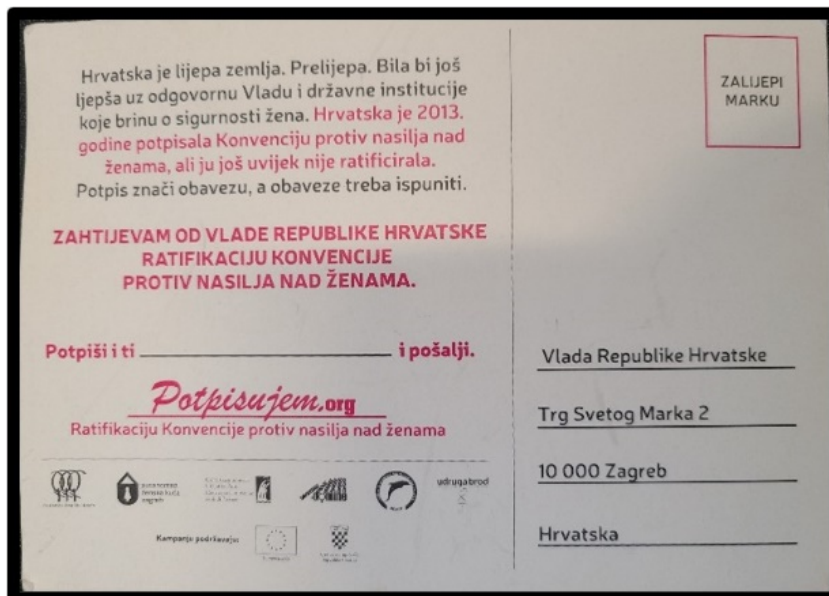
NGOs will draw more attention if they employ a multi-faceted approach. An Armenian HRD explained that in their work to promote awareness of domestic violence, they used multiple tactics:

We got domestic violence survivors to tell their stories both online and in person at rallies and protests, and in meetings with officials. We decided we needed to go, in person, to rural areas and small towns to hold education sessions and rallies/protests where domestic violence survivors could tell their stories. We met, in person, with journalists to educate them on domestic violence issues and to get media attention. We held education sessions with police departments around the country to educate police on DV and gender stereotype issues. We also met with government employees and elected officials to educate them on the issues.⁸³¹



A Bulgarian HRD similarly stressed the importance of using multiple and far-reaching platforms.⁸³² For instance, in some countries, civil society has created advertisements to put in unlikely places, such as billboard or subway advertisements.⁸³³ The Women’s Network of Croatia also adapted traditional letter-writing campaigns to be more eye-catching to the

average public member. They developed colorful postcards with photos of Croatia, similar to those found in tourist shops. The postcards were addressed to the Government of Croatia with a pre-written message asking for ratification.⁸³⁴



Multiple interviewees stressed the need to try activities that are new and have never been seen in the country. Interviewees encouraged activists to be fearless about trying something for the first time.⁸³⁵ As a Moldovan HRD recommended, “build a bit further from your usual balance. You can discover a lot of interesting things.”⁸³⁶ In Croatia, the Women’s

Network of Croatia found success in drawing attention by creating several new activities to counter the opposition. Since these activities had never been done in the country before, they readily drew the attention of the media and public.⁸³⁷ The network worked with a journalist and documentary film director to hold vigils in front of hospitals and screen those videos on social media. They named the campaign “Master of My Own Body,” drawing from the 1957 Croatian feature film to attract public recognition.⁸³⁸ When a Ukrainian NGO needed 8,000 more signatures for its petition on ratification, it turned to a mainstream app for women.⁸³⁹

With the help of a local celebrity, they posted an ad for signatures in a menstruation cycle app that has thousands of women subscribers.⁸⁴⁰ Posted on the app's chatboard, the request secured 7,000 signatures in two days.⁸⁴¹ She recounted, "It was shocking. We didn't expect it. It was a great experience for us. We got out of our activist bubble and just got to women in Ukraine. Just [ordinary] women."⁸⁴²

Traditional media attention is not always easy to attract. As one interviewee suggested, however, NGOs must develop a relevant message and provide the media with valuable documented information and expertise.⁸⁴³ Across the board, activists agreed that the key to working with media is to share individual stories from victims and survivors.⁸⁴⁴ One HRD summarized, "You give [the media] stories ... they give you the coverage."⁸⁴⁵ Another HRD in Poland suggested that a multimedia approach should incorporate images as well as words.⁸⁴⁶ In other cases, civil society uses theatrical or artistic displays, or performances that draw on pop culture references to attract attention. Croatian activists have frequently dressed in costumes from Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and marched through public squares.⁸⁴⁷ Women's Network of Croatia members deliberately began to appear before the media at opposition protests.⁸⁴⁸ The costumed protestors drew much of the attention and prompted the opposition to complain that the media "gave more space to a handful of counter protesters than the 4,000 or 10,000 opposition protesters."⁸⁴⁹ This model also has easy repeatability, and other activists have replicated *The Handmaid's Tale* protest at least six times.⁸⁵⁰

Hashtags

The hashtag #IstanbulConventionSavesLives began trending after Turkey's President Erdogan's announcement to withdraw from the convention.

In addition to traditional media, social media is also essential to promoting the Istanbul Convention. When resources are scarce, social media can provide a free or low-cost alternative. A Polish NGO partnered with documentary film directors and media marketing companies to create short videos or films on individual stories of gender-based violence and femicide. These videos and films are available on a newly created website promoted via Facebook until the NGO secures more funding.⁸⁵¹ Social media is also a crucial tool to achieve ratification or stop the withdrawal process. Activists in Poland thwarted opposition efforts to de-ratify the Istanbul Convention through social media for five years. NGOs and activists used social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and NGO websites, to create an informal coalition from a broad spectrum of society and swiftly mobilize large numbers of people to protest government action. Key to these mobilization efforts is the messaging – it must be focused, put the individual first, and address a universal problem, such as domestic violence, that affects mothers or sisters.⁸⁵²

In Turkey, Twitter campaigns have sprung up and gained traction in response to publicized femicides and incidents of vigilante violence.⁸⁵³ While they generally do not include a call to action, protesters are encouraged to follow court cases of alleged murderers and criminal assailants and to protest outside courthouses. In the case of Sule Cet, a university student killed by her employer, the Cet's family lawyer credited social media with forcing the application of the law to the facts that led to conviction.⁸⁵⁴

INVEST IN RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF NEW ACTIVISTS AND SUPPORTERS

In addition to raising visibility, NGOs also provide education aimed at teaching and instilling human rights values in target groups.⁸⁵⁶ In many ways, civil society is actively recruiting and training the next generation of human rights defenders. Center "Women's Perspectives" in Ukraine runs an annual Feminist Intensive Camp for young women from across Ukraine. The three-day training brings together more than 50 female activists active on cross-cutting issues, such as internally displaced persons climate change, media stereotypes, reproductive health, and violence against women. The camp uses domestic and international experts to teach, but also invites Feminist Intensive participants to propose and deliver their own workshops to peers—thus building leadership capacity and training skills among these young women. With each annual Feminist Intensive Camp, Center Women's Perspectives is building and strengthening a countrywide cadre of connected, trained young women activists within Ukraine.⁸⁵⁷

"NOTHING THAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IS JUST BECAUSE GOVERNMENTS THOUGHT OF IT. ALL OF IT HAS BEEN DONE BECAUSE OF A STRONG WOMEN'S MOVEMENT."

Croatian HRD⁸⁵⁵

In Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation has trained generations of young lawyers from CEE and FSU to use international legal mechanisms to defend women's rights when all domestic options have failed. Since 2004, the Women's Human Rights Training Institute (WHRTI) has trained more than 150 lawyers on forms of violence against women, UN human rights mechanisms, and the European Court of Human Rights. WHRTI fellows have continued in their careers to change domestic laws, challenge harmful court decisions before international and regional bodies, and draw national attention to issues of women's rights through their work. One of the most important contributing factors to WHRTI's success is that the eight cohorts of trained lawyers remain networked across countries, which gives them a peer support community in addressing human rights challenges. They stay connected via social media to share new case law and developments, post resources, and seek legal advice from fellow peers.⁸⁵⁸

Other NGOs described how they continuously train stakeholders on women’s human rights. In Italy, NGOs train lawyers and judges to raise awareness about violence against women in the legal system.⁸⁵⁹ Other members of civil society train journalists on women’s issues. In one country, an NGO invited journalists to a breakfast and separated them into groups to discuss issues such as women’s health or violence against women. Groups of experts—nurses, attorneys, advocates—led the discussions and gave journalists an overview of relevant laws and treaties, including the Istanbul Convention.⁸⁶⁰

In addition to training systems actors, it is essential the general public receive education on human rights values and issues. Civil society has worked to raise awareness about the meaning of the Istanbul Convention within communities.⁸⁶¹ In Slovakia, civil society launched a campaign to target members of the public who may not be educated about the convention.⁸⁶² The campaign talked about violence against women, how it affects women, how they are socialized into fearing sexual violence, as well as the role of men and toxic masculinity.⁸⁶³ A Bulgarian LGBTI organization hosted seminars, workshops, and events to educate people about the LGBTI community. The Bulgarian interviewee acknowledged, however, they need more “time and space for communication” to promote awareness about gender and the Istanbul Convention.⁸⁶⁴

BUILD UNCONVENTIONAL ALLIANCES

Many interviewees reported that building new allies outside their traditional circles has brought many benefits in countering the opposition. Groups outside their orbit not only bring greater support but even reputable name recognition.⁸⁶⁵ As a former UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders noted, “International solidarity is the best protection for women defenders.”⁸⁶⁶

For example, in Ukraine, organizers of the annual women’s march began working with NGOs that focus on issues beyond women’s rights.⁸⁶⁷ One HRD’s NGO works with organizations focused on women with disabilities, minority and Roma women, women with HIV/AIDS, mothers’ groups, women in sports, feminists, LGBTI groups, and internally displaced women. As a result, the planning committee is now an umbrella of diverse groups that share the work.⁸⁶⁸ For the 2021 women’s march, they strategically defined the theme to include both Istanbul Convention ratification and COVID-19, thus broadening their reach even further.⁸⁶⁹ Another Ukrainian NGO networks with family activists within academic and university institutions on ratification of the Istanbul Convention.⁸⁷⁰ An Armenian NGO similarly found advantages to coordinating with different NGOs working on domestic violence, disability and minority rights, gender equality, HIV/AIDS, and LGBTI rights.⁸⁷¹ Her advice for NGOs seeking to broaden their alliances to other groups is to develop focused messaging and divide responsibilities.⁸⁷²

When civil society looks beyond the conventional partners, it can proffer unexpected yet effective alliances. A Moldovan domestic violence lawyer found an ally in a mental health community center.⁸⁷³ The mental health coordinator offered to host sessions on the Istanbul Convention at her center so she could build a database of supporters.⁸⁷⁴ On March 22, 2018, the Women’s Network of Croatia (WNC) organized a press conference that brought together representatives of both right- and left-wing political parties, atheists, and Catholics, who were united by an issue important to all women: ratification of the convention. This press conference, showing a unified front of diverse people in support of the convention, helped to galvanize momentum in support of ratifying the convention; it demonstrated to the country that the issue was wide-ranging and impacted women from all backgrounds.⁸⁷⁵ A researcher on the backlash against the Istanbul Convention reiterated the importance of “widen[ing] the constituency” of organizations concerned about gender and violence against women. She suggested partnering with organizations working toward a wider democracy agenda that have not necessarily thought about using a gendered lens. Her research showed this strategy enjoyed some success in Hungary and Poland, where many activists are working against a strong right-wing government.⁸⁷⁶

Finally, bridging alliances builds numbers. Because of their intersectional cooperation, Ukrainian organizers have seen numbers escalate at their marches each year.⁸⁷⁷ In Moldova, a HRD noted how their online petition for the Istanbul Convention garnered additional signatures from organizations with no connection to gender equality, domestic violence, or education.⁸⁷⁸

FIND SMALLER FACTIONS WITHIN THE OPPOSITION AS ALLIES

Pro-Istanbul Convention supporters face powerful opposition forces — often government or religious — in their countries. When the dominant government or religion opposes ratification, HRDs have creatively found “sub-allies” within these groups.⁸⁷⁹ For example, a Moldovan HRD described how she lost her connections with political parties over the years.⁸⁸⁰ She decided to narrow her target from political parties to women parliamentarian caucuses to hold discussions about the Istanbul Convention.⁸⁸¹ She found a similar approach worked within the religious sector. Although Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion in Moldova, she has found individual priests, as well as a local community of a more traditional religion, who quietly support women victims.⁸⁸² She explained, “I know what religious groups’ arguments are, but among them, you can find some people who can talk to you in an intelligent way.”⁸⁸³ Even when the government seems adamantly opposed to the convention, civil society should still seek out supporters within the government. A HRD observed there are “still some barriers holding the fort in Poland...within the Polish government, you have different views on the Istanbul Convention. It’s not like they are all for the withdrawal. There are still some walls protecting the Istanbul Convention from being withdrawn by Poland.”⁸⁸⁴

A Turkish HRD described a similar example of mobilizing allies within the opposition groups around Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. In December, when it became clear the Turkish government was considering withdrawal from the convention, women's groups across Turkey spoke up in support of it. Women in conservative groups and in the ruling party opposed withdrawal alongside more progressive women's organizations.⁸⁸⁵ Sevda Karaca with the Rose and Bread Initiative explained that violence against women is a chronic problem in Turkey, and many women from more traditionalist backgrounds voted for the AK Party because they wanted protection. "Now they are angry," Karaca stated, a sentiment that has divided the AK Party over the issue following the President's decree to withdraw.⁸⁸⁶

Other women's HRDs expressed concern that too much division could weaken the NGO strategy to promote the Istanbul Convention.⁸⁸⁷ One Croatian activist pointed out that while it is important to be "fierce" about maintaining human rights standards, it is equally important to avoid a mindset that could exclude certain allies, such as faith-based activists.⁸⁸⁸ Another HRD in Turkey emphasized the need to partner with "reasonable men's groups."⁸⁸⁹ This approach might involve collaborating with an organization that focuses on men's rights or issues, but is not strictly opposed to women's rights.

Catholic Sisters: "Nuns on the Bus"

In the United States, there are religious subgroups that are activists for social justice. NETWORK, or also known as Nuns on the Bus, is a group of Catholic Sisters that stands for "justice and peace," and "educates, organizes and lobbies for economic and social transformation."⁸⁹⁰ NETWORK is founded in the spirit of Vatican II and is rooted in principles that value women's leadership, including welcoming members of the LGBTI community, accepting people from religious and secular backgrounds, and working to become a multicultural anti-racist organization.⁸⁹¹ NETWORK is an example of an organization rooted in the Catholic Church and still actively advocating on federal policies, including immigration reform, economic justice, and voting.⁸⁹²

Another example of a potential ally within the religious community is the European Evangelical Alliance. On May 4, 2021, prior to the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Istanbul Convention, it published a press release calling on all countries in Europe to address domestic violence and violence against women, including sexual exploitation, pornography, and domestic abuse.⁸⁹³ In the press release, the European Evangelical Alliance acknowledges that the convention has created "controversy" in Europe, yet the European Evangelical Alliance emphasizes that it "does not want the core issues to be lost in all the argument."⁸⁹⁴

Finally, it is important to remember that every population has a “persuadable middle,” or those who can be brought along to support the cause when they share a common value(s). One conservative elected official chastised the national government and civil society for their complacency in losing the narrative on the Istanbul Convention, a treaty that should easily have universal support. He elaborated that the national government should have communicated more effectively with people but instead made the mistake of assuming the public would understand the benefits of the convention. As a result, the government lapsed on conducting public education on the convention’s details and thereby lost public support they could have otherwise secured.⁸⁹⁵ Activists who can identify the issue(s) the persuadable middle cares about and develop a communication strategy to speak to that population may be able to sway more allies to their side.

GO OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY

Another effective strategy civil society has employed is to tap supporters outside of the country’s borders. Multiple HRDs emphasized the power of a transnational approach.⁸⁹⁶ Prior to ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the WNC Croatia worked closely with various EU and CoE officials who helped their efforts to pressure the Croatian government.⁸⁹⁷ In Armenia, a coalition of groups leveraged outside human rights organizations to pressure the government to address domestic violence.⁸⁹⁸

In countries where laws and policies have constricted the space or funding for civil society, or where HRDs work at great personal risk to themselves, the diaspora can be an effective resource to bolster women’s rights movements within the home country. In Moldova, the women’s movement has begun to leverage the diaspora of Moldovan women. Activists in Moldova reached out to members of the Moldovan diaspora in EU countries, including France, Italy, and Poland. Virtual space allows the diaspora partnership to transcend distance, discuss violence against women, and share strategies.⁸⁹⁹ The Moldovan diaspora not only sends financial support, but also exerts significant political pressure. For example, when the government failed to provide the diaspora access to voting, they mobilized and contacted pro-European party activists in Moldova to change course. Because funds from the diaspora in the EU contributes to the country’s public income, there is an underlying pressure to vote for pro-European parties. Given that one of the opposition’s arguments is that the Istanbul Convention is too pro-EU, the diaspora may hold great potential for women’s rights movements seeking additional support and political pressure to ratify the Istanbul Convention.⁹⁰⁰

Persuading the Middle and Knowing Your Audience

In the United States, four states faced constitutional referenda to ban same sex marriage, similar to the referenda many of the reviewed countries have encountered. The campaigns to defeat this proposed amendment used several successful strategies. They found that using jargon or legalese, such as “equality” or “discrimination” was not persuasive to wide groups from diverse backgrounds and positions. Instead, the campaign found that the universal word to move hearts and minds was “love.” The focus was on the loving commitment that is the basis for all families—gay and straight. They found diverse and non-partisan allies – people from all political parties, NGOs, and business leaders. They also trained volunteers to carry out “one-on-one conversation drive[s]” to tell stories, make the issue personal, and remind the community how the amendment would harm people.⁹⁰¹ Finally, they found and deployed messengers from the perceived opposition: in one commercial, a heterosexual, Caucasian, Catholic couple married for 13 years with 3 children who are members of the conservative political party appeared in an ad to vote against the referendum. The couple had a friendship with their neighbors, who were gay and the “most wonderful neighbors.”⁹⁰²

FIND ALTERNATIVE CHANNELS TO NAVIGATE WITHIN THE POLITICAL ARENA

The political field is challenging for many supporters of the convention. In several countries, governments openly resist the Istanbul Convention and spread misunderstanding about its contents. Nevertheless, civil society in these countries have found ways to navigate through the political arena and to promote women’s rights.

Ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a political problem that must be solved politically. As a result, focusing efforts on educating ministers and policymakers about the convention’s importance is not wasted effort.⁹⁰³ In the Czech Republic, the Czech Women’s Lobby and other Czech women’s organizations have prioritized one-on-one meetings with MPs to educate them about the Istanbul Convention and encourage their support for ratification.⁹⁰⁴ NGOs in Armenia have focused their efforts on communicating with the Ministry of Justice to raise awareness about domestic violence and provide an alternate message to that of the opposition.⁹⁰⁵

Another political strategy women HRDs have pursued is to run for elected office. The presence of more women in Parliament has facilitated the adoption of anti-discrimination, domestic violence, inheritance, and child support laws in several countries, including Croatia.⁹⁰⁶ Croatian activist Rada Boric, now an elected MP, stressed the importance of seating women in public office. As she described it, this approach means they have “one foot on the street, and...one

foot in Parliament.”⁹⁰⁷ As a feminist, she decided to run for Parliament because they had no MPs to champion laws on women’s rights in the past decade. Within seven weeks of serving in Parliament, she exacted a “miracle” on September 23 when, for the first time in the Croatian Parliament, everyone stood to observe one minute of silence for all the women killed in Croatia. She affirmed, “My minute of silence really proved it was good to be in Parliament.” In a Parliamentary culture where the opposition has accused the ombudsperson on children’s rights of pedophilia, she remarked, “At least there are now seven of us in Parliament to defend human rights and women’s rights in the Parliament.”⁹⁰⁸

Women Winning

Women Winning is a non-partisan, political non-profit organization based in Minnesota that seeks to “encourage, promote, support, and elect pro-choice women of all political parties” to public office. It works to eliminate the barriers that hinder women, particularly those from marginalized groups, from running for political office.⁹⁰⁹ Women Winning invests in the education of candidates throughout critical campaign stages, which spans individual coaching on developing the campaign plan, to budgeting to developing task lists and understanding changing political scenes.⁹¹⁰ Importantly, it leverages its 19,000 members throughout the state to volunteer for candidates and help do the boots-on-the-ground work of campaigning. Its work begins with the initial recruitment of candidates and is a community-driven process in which Women Winning uses its relationships with community activists and thought leaders to identify and encourage pro-choice candidates to run. Importantly, the organization is non-partisan and focuses on supporting women candidates based on their value set, as opposed to their partisan affiliation. By choosing to support pro-choice women, they have found these women candidates tend to stand for many other issues besides reproductive justice, including public education and climate justice, thus maximizing the impact for other rights. Women Winning recognizes how readily an official’s seat can be lost in the next election cycle; therefore, the organization commits to supporting candidates for more than one election cycle to ensure women are in office for more than one term.

In countries where the government has outright rejected ratification of the Istanbul Convention, civil society has nevertheless found alternative means of safeguarding women’s rights. Although ratification is forestalled in Bulgaria, advocates have demanded changes to Bulgaria’s law on violence against women and firearms. These efforts resulted in the circulation of a draft law on ratification and consideration of other changes.⁹¹¹ In Hungary, women’s NGOs are seeking to implement the Istanbul Convention’s standards into domestic law,

notwithstanding the country's refusal to ratify it. In Turkey, women's NGOs challenged President Erdoğan's withdrawal decree as unconstitutional. Civil society claims that any withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention must follow the national legal procedures used to ratify it as well as international legal requirements, including Article 80 of the Istanbul Convention.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

A key success strategy is to know the target audience and tailor the message accordingly. Above all, interviewees agreed that the message should be simple. When drafting a petition for the Istanbul Convention, her colleague expressed concern the language was "too simple." The HRD insisted on keeping the language basic, however, because "people have to understand it."⁹¹³ She added that when she talks to the public, she speaks to them as though they are friends, and she is sharing personal stories of women.⁹¹⁴

Almost universally, interviewees affirmed the importance of telling stories to show the impact of the Istanbul Convention.⁹¹⁵ A HRD explained that describing the Istanbul Convention as having specialist urgent services is meaningless to most people. Instead, she tells a personal story about a mother in a small village with only a few police officers and no means of getting to a safe place.⁹¹⁶ A Polish HRD explained how they share stories of femicide—women killed by their husbands or boyfriends—on their Facebook page to convey the magnitude of the problem.⁹¹⁷

Knowing your audience means tailoring the message to what is important to them. For the government, civil society has found that money is one of the most persuasive ways to frame the importance of the Istanbul Convention. When speaking to the President of the Moldovan Parliamentary Commission, an HRD told him, "You will have a lot of funds now from the public budget for services. Having the Istanbul Convention ratified [means] you will have more money from other donors. More than 60 percent of gender equality and prevention is covered by external financial assistance, not by the public budget."⁹¹⁸ She also highlights the international political capital that ratification will bring them.⁹¹⁹ One MP, tasked with assessing the convention, asked what the benefit to the country and himself was if his commission took up the draft law. Her response was that it would bring favorable international visibility in the current negotiations with Sweden on commercial matters, and, if ratified, the convention would bring outside funding for the services for which his commission was responsible.⁹²⁰ In

"YOU HAVE TO CREATE THIS SPACE WHERE EVERYBODY CAN ASK AND AGAIN TO TALK IN AN ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE. AND [YOU HAVE] TO KNOW THE PEOPLE, WHY THEY FEAR IT. THEY DON'T READ ALL THE NEWS."

Moldovan HRD⁹¹²

Ukraine, activists explain that ratification will give the country a ready-made blueprint to follow for providing services and protection to women.⁹²¹

Demonstrating the need for the Istanbul Convention to everyone is also important. A Croatian HRD explained:

What works really well is to show the number of femicides, to show the number of women who don't get restraining orders, to show the lack of shelters, to show all of these [gaps] that exist in every country. It's important to say that things are not working out and that we need this.⁹²²

During the **16 Days of Activism**, WAVE launched a social media campaign to highlight how the Istanbul Convention would protect women and girls if ratified and implemented in different countries. Through its #SignRatifyImplement campaign, WAVE issued posts each day with the call to sign, ratify, and implement the treaty.

#SignRatifyImplement | WAVE Social Media Campaign

International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25 Nov 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3606159136119435>

Croatia: If the Istanbul Convention was effectively implemented, all counties would have shelter for women affected by violence and their children, 26 Nov 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3608657499202932>

Greece: If the Istanbul Convention was effectively implemented in Greece and in Europe, femicide and “honour”-based violence against women and girls would be eradicated, 27 Nov 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3611406582261357>

Austria: If the Istanbul Convention was effectively implemented, Austria would receive sufficient funds to invest in the prevention and the elimination of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) for an equal and peaceful society, 28 Nov 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3611597585575590>

Croatia: If the Istanbul Convention was effectively implemented, Croatia would have more than 1 rape crisis center, 28 Nov 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3611597585575590>

Albania: If the Istanbul Convention was effectively implemented states would have set standards against harmful gender roles and would challenge attitudes that excuse violence against women, starting from the media, 29 Nov 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3614265971975418>

Bosnia and Herzegovina: If the Istanbul convention was effectively implemented, women affected by violence and rape and their children would have access to safe houses in all major BiH cities, 29 Nov 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3614214088647273>

Hungary: If Hungary would ratify the Istanbul Convention, acts of violence would have to be taken into account in decisions of parental custody and rights of access, 30 Nov 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3614452091956806>

Italy: if the Istanbul Convention was effectively implemented, Italy would ensure that there would be enough support services for women and girls affected by violence to access, 1 Dec 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3624906680911347>

Moldova: If the Istanbul Convention was ratified and effectively implemented, children and adults would be educated in the spirit of equality, respect, and non-violent communication, 2 Dec 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3627463443989004>

Slovakia: If the Istanbul Convention were ratified in Slovakia, women would not be victims of sexual harassment, but they would feel safe, 2 Dec 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3633099520092063>

Estonia: If the Istanbul Convention was effectively implemented, children affected by violence would have the right to get adequate psychological counseling to help them recover from abuse. This is not currently done in Estonia, 9 Dec 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3645699842165364>

Ukraine: If the Istanbul Convention is ratified, those suffering from sexual harassment will have more possibilities to protect their rights. In the Ukrainian legislation, sexual harassment is not defined as a separate crime in the Criminal Code, 9 Dec 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/womenagainstviolenceeurope/posts/3646211745447507>

WHY RATIFY THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION?

STRONG WOMEN STRONG FAMILIES STRONG NATIONS



PREVENTS VIOLENCE

Ratification holds the state accountable for all forms of violence against women and prosecutes perpetrators



PROMOTES GENDER EQUALITY

Ratification promotes equality between men and women and ensures that neither culture nor religion can be used to justify violence



PROVIDES SUPPORT SERVICES

Ratification ensures that all victims of violence have access to support services such as shelters, to 24/7 helplines, and to counseling and crisis centers



PROTECTS VICTIMS

Ratification prioritizes victims by removing perpetrators from the home and by ensuring victim access to shelters

Positive messages about the Istanbul Convention can help counter negative messaging from the opposition. Multiple HRDs stressed the importance of positive and creative framing.⁹²³ For instance, one researcher suggested a message that emphasizes the beneficial impact of women leaders on their countries, such as New Zealand. Showing that women leaders create positive change shows that gender equality is in the interest of all people in society.⁹²⁴ Like the Moldovan HRD, she also suggested framing gender equality as “politically and economically expedient.”⁹²⁵

Some members of civil society use messages that reframe the opposition’s rhetoric rather than create a new message.⁹²⁶ For instance, one Hungarian organization developed an ironic title for a demonstration they organized in support of the Istanbul Convention. The government sought to increase fertility rates and used the argument of demographic decline to oppose the Istanbul Convention. In a direct challenge to this message, the women’s organization titled their event “Dead women cannot give birth to any more children.”⁹²⁷

An important strategy for civil society is to take back and redefine the family. For the opposition, the traditional family is its keystone for swaying public opinion. HRDs, however, have also used positive messaging to reclaim the family. One Slovak interviewee suggested reframing the topic of the family to show that gender equality is essential

to a good family life.⁹²⁸ Similarly, another women’s organization used the phrase: “Tradition Doesn’t Make Families; Families Make Traditions!”⁹²⁹ Another sample concept, shown on the left, shows the link between women’s protection and strong families and countries—key arguments of the opposition that civil society should strive to reclaim.

LEVERAGE RESOURCES

Civil society is operating under scarce resources and time. It is essential that NGOs leverage all resources available to them to expand their reach. Several interviewees shared the ways they expand their resources and tap into more options.

Volunteers are a key component to stretching resources to promote the Istanbul Convention and women's rights. For example, a Ukrainian HRD acknowledged that as NGOs are unlikely to get funding to organize a march, volunteers are crucial at all stages of planning and implementation.⁹³⁰ Further, when gathering signatures or distributing leaflets, volunteers are crucial to expanding that reach.⁹³¹

Civil society also taps into influencers, whether they are local celebrities or individuals with a large social media following. For example, in Ukraine, the activists involved a famous singer in their petition on the app.⁹³² Influencers need not only be women's rights activists but may have other target audiences, such as mothers or youth. One HRD emphasizes the importance of creating social media campaigns with celebrities or influencers to engage young people.⁹³³ When choosing an influencer, one interviewee advises looking at the number of followers, the breadth of his or her audience, whether she or he has a gender-sensitive profile, and the person's ability to talk about the Istanbul Convention.⁹³⁴ Civil society should also take steps to vet influencers to ensure they do not have harmful connections or backgrounds that could damage the NGO's credibility. Civil society has also selected influencers who, as experts, hold sway over decisionmakers. In Moldova, an NGO invited one of the authors of the Istanbul Convention to present in Parliament. They found this was an effective way to persuade parliamentarians.⁹³⁵

Perhaps surprisingly, the conflict between the human rights movement and the opposition has a silver lining for pro-Istanbul Convention supporters. The tensions are drawing attention and renewed support, which civil society should harness. In Croatia, women's HRDs noted that the fight with the opposition over the Istanbul Convention helped energize the women's movement in Croatia. One advocate explained that "it's become a huge issue, and it's brought to front and center women's rights. We are talking about domestic violence like never before because we are talking about the Istanbul Convention."⁹³⁶ She added that recently, in particularly notable cases of rape and domestic violence, people are not forgetting, and such cases are sparking protests across Croatia. Although the opposition is strong, the voices of civil society and HRDs are becoming stronger. After Turkey's announcement to withdraw from the convention, the Istanbul Convention garnered international media attention, and the hashtag #IstanbulConventionSavesLives began trending on social media.

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- ⁸¹⁸ Ukraine Interview 3.
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- ⁸²⁰ Moldova Interview 4.
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- ⁸²² Poland Interview 1.
- ⁸²³ Kate Brown, “Meet the Artist Behind the Lighting Bolt Design That Has Become the Symbol of Women’s Rights in an Increasingly Oppressive Poland,” *Artnet Website, News* (Nov. 5, 2020), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/meet-the-artist-behind-the-lighting-bolt-1921095>; Kuba Stezycki and Malgorzata Wojtunik, “Polish Bakers Support Protests with Lightning Bolts on Bread and Pastries,” *Reuters* (Oct. 30, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-poland-abortion-pastry/polish-bakers-support-protests-with-lightning-bolts-on-bread-and-pastries-idUKKBN27F226>; Timothy Jones, “Poland: Protesters Slam Plans to Withdraw from Domestic Violence Convention,” *DW* (July 24, 2020), <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-protesters-slam-plans-to-withdraw-from-domestic-violence-convention/a-54312965>.
- ⁸²⁴ Poland Interview 1.
- ⁸²⁵ Hungary Interview 2.
- ⁸²⁶ Ukraine Interview 7.
- ⁸²⁷ Poland Interview 4.
- ⁸²⁸ Ukraine Interview 7.
- ⁸²⁹ Id.
- ⁸³⁰ Id.
- ⁸³¹ Armenia Interview 3.
- ⁸³² Bulgaria Interview 4.
- ⁸³³ Id.; Bulgaria Interview 6.
- ⁸³⁴ Center for Women War Victims ROSA et al., postcards on file with The Advocates for Human Rights.
- ⁸³⁵ Ukraine Interview 7; Moldova Interview 4; Women’s Network Croatia, Activities of Women’s Network Croatia in 2018 Related to Ratification of the Istanbul Convention, 2018 (on file with the authors).
- ⁸³⁶ Moldova Interview 4.
- ⁸³⁷ Women’s Network Croatia, Activities of Women’s Network Croatia in 2018 Related to Ratification of the Istanbul Convention, 2018 (on file with the authors).
- ⁸³⁸ Id.
- ⁸³⁹ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting II (June 2020).
- ⁸⁴⁰ Id.
- ⁸⁴¹ Id.
- ⁸⁴² Id.
- ⁸⁴³ Moldova Interview 4.
- ⁸⁴⁴ Poland Interview 4; Moldova Interview 4; Romania Interview 1; Ukraine Interview 6; Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (June 18-20, 2019); Armenia Interview 3.
- ⁸⁴⁵ Moldova Interview 4.
- ⁸⁴⁶ Poland Interview 1.
- ⁸⁴⁷ Women’s Network Croatia, Activities of Women’s Network Croatia in 2018 Related to Ratification of the Istanbul Convention, 2018 (on file with the authors).
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- ⁸⁴⁹ Id.
- ⁸⁵⁰ Id.

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- ⁸⁶³ *Id.*
- ⁸⁶⁴ Bulgaria Interview 6.
- ⁸⁶⁵ Moldova Interview 4; Armenia Interview 1; Bulgaria Interview 6; Croatia Interview 1; Ukraine Interview 3; Simonovic et al., “Pushback against the Istanbul Convention Seminar;” EŞİK- Women’s Platform for Equality, “Feminists Meet Virtually across Borders to Resist the Attacks on the Istanbul Convention;” “Reversing Shrinking Space for Women’s Rights Defenders,” *American Bar Association, CSW Forum* (Mar. 19, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBjMgYfCqd0> (posted on YouTube on Mar. 22, 2021).
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- ⁸⁶⁷ Ukraine Interview 7.
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- ⁸⁶⁹ *Id.*
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- ⁸⁸¹ *Id.*
- ⁸⁸² *Id.*

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- ⁸⁸³ Id.
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- ⁸⁸⁹ Simonovic et al., “Pushback against the Istanbul Convention Seminar.”
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- ⁹⁰⁸ Id.
- ⁹⁰⁹ Zoom interview with Women Winning, St. Paul, MN (July 20, 2021).
- ⁹¹⁰ Women Winning, “Coaching” (Accessed July 27, 2021). <https://www.womenwinning.org/run-for-office/coaching/>; Women Winning, “Mission,” *Women Winning* (Accessed June 27, 2021), <https://www.womenwinning.org/about-women-winning/our-mission/>.
- ⁹¹¹ Bulgaria Interview 7.
- ⁹¹² Moldova Interview 4.
- ⁹¹³ Id.
- ⁹¹⁴ Id.
- ⁹¹⁵ Poland Interview 4; Moldova Interview 4; Ukraine Interviews 6-7; Armenia Interview 3; Romania Interview 1; Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-9, 2021)
- ⁹¹⁶ Moldova Interview 4.
- ⁹¹⁷ Poland Interview 4.

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- ⁹¹⁸ Moldova Interview 4.
- ⁹¹⁹ Id.
- ⁹²⁰ Id.
- ⁹²¹ Human Rights Defender Coalition Meeting II (June 2020).
- ⁹²² Belgium Interview 1.
- ⁹²³ Slovakia Interview 2; Croatia Interview 2; Austria Interview 1; Simonovic et al., “Pushback against the Istanbul Convention Seminar.”
- ⁹²⁴ Simonovic et al., “Pushback against the Istanbul Convention Seminar.”
- ⁹²⁵ Id.
- ⁹²⁶ Slovakia Interview 2; Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-9, 2021).
- ⁹²⁷ Hungary Interview 1.
- ⁹²⁸ Slovakia Interview 2.
- ⁹²⁹ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting (July 8-9, 2021).
- ⁹³⁰ Ukraine Interview 7.
- ⁹³¹ Moldova Interview 4; Bulgaria Interview 6.
- ⁹³² Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting II (June 2020).
- ⁹³³ Croatia Interview 26.
- ⁹³⁴ Moldova Interview 4.
- ⁹³⁵ Moldova Interview 1.
- ⁹³⁶ Human Rights Defenders Coalition Meeting II (June 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO CIVIL SOCIETY

Find New Supporters

- **Broaden alliances beyond traditional women’s rights organizations** to other movements working on social justice and related issues, including disabilities, refugees and internally displaced persons, immigration, LGBTI, family planning, health care, children, academics, journalists, and race. Adopt an intersectional approach that encompasses the challenges for women victims of violence to bridge alliances across different groups and expand reach.
- **Tap into diaspora populations in other countries** for lobbying, raising awareness of the challenges on a worldwide scale, and financial support. Civil society should consider prioritizing their focus on diasporas living in countries with a heavy Catholic or Orthodox presence and encourage the diaspora community to lobby their country of origin and their country of residence on bilateral diplomacy on target issues. Civil society can also network with and raise awareness among diaspora populations through remote connections.
- **Leverage existing networks or participate in developing networks to counter the backlash.** Global Philanthropy Project encourages the resourcing of the “ecosystem” of networks and collectives at both the national and regional levels.⁹³⁷
- **Find allies within opposition forces.** Where the opposition is strong, civil society should seek out sub-allies from the opposition that support human rights. For example, these sub-allies may include individuals, sisters or nuns, other religions, individual priests or church officials, or academics.
- **Encourage and support women with shared values to run for elected office.** Civil society should identify candidates with common values and work to eliminate barriers that prevent women from participating in political processes and running for office.

Leverage Resources

- **Use volunteers and in-kind donations to stretch scarce resources.** Using volunteers to carry out work has a triple impact: it expands the reach of limited

resources, promotes education about the issues among the volunteers and their circles, and garners new potential supporters.

- **Leverage pro bono relationships with local and global law firms** to assist with legal advice, serving clients, and defense against lawsuits intended to intimidate, such as SLAPPs.
- **Tap into influencers to disseminate your message and build public awareness.** Civil society should look beyond the vein of violence against women to other influencers on issues such as motherhood, homemaking, fashion, music, and youth.
- **Use social media to disseminate your messages, issue calls to action, and grow the supporter base.** Platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, are free and can spread messages swiftly and broadly.

Use Strategic Messaging

- **Collect and tell stories about the victims NGOs serve.** Personalize the problem by sharing the stories of individuals, with their consent or anonymizing the account, and the impact the NGO has on them, their children, their safety, and their lives. Use these stories to rebuild public trust and understanding of the work of civil society.
- **Use proactive, simple, short, and positive messages.** Civil society should avoid defensive, negative, or jargon-laden messaging.
- **Tailor messages to the audience.** Effective messaging is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Civil society should know what moves their audiences and customize messages accordingly, for example: money (government and business owners), personal stories (public and media), safe and healthy families (religious groups).
- **Use every opportunity to educate about the Istanbul Convention.** At every event with state officials or community members, civil society should strive to mention the Istanbul Convention and its benefits with the goal of making it widely recognized and understood. Research shows that it takes approximately 17 repetitions of a word for a person to remember it.⁹³⁸
- **Disseminate information on the problem of violence against women and domestic violence in the country.**⁹³⁹ Sharing research on these problems prior to ratification will educate the public and stakeholders on the extent of the problem and the need for ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

- **Reclaim and redefine the family.** Civil society and other supporters should strive to reclaim the family and find universal values to describe the family that appeals to audiences on both sides of the issue.

Reach Out to Strategic Targets

- Develop relationships with small and large businesses and transnational corporations. Enlist corporations to do advocacy on your issues and find corporations that align with your positions. Businesses are increasing their commitments to human rights and developing relationships with owners and employees of businesses can tap into potential resources and lobbying allies. Civil society should avoid politicizing the issue and instead strive to frame issues around human values, such as saving lives and keeping women safe.
- **Meet with the embassies of “friendly” countries with a commitment to human rights.** Civil society should apprise foreign governments of the backlash to the Istanbul Convention and request bilateral diplomatic pressure on its own government, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- **Invite key CoE and EU officials to civil society’s events on the Istanbul Convention and other relevant human rights.** Invite regional and international officials to remote events who would otherwise not be available to attend in-person events.
- **Lobby countries with membership on the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) or with candidacy for the HRC.** Civil society should inform these foreign governments of the backlash to the Istanbul Convention and request bilateral diplomatic pressure on its own government and for the issue to be raised at the HRC, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- **Use UN mechanisms to raise the issue at the international level.** Civil society should leverage the complaint mechanisms for relevant UN Special Procedures, such as the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women (VAW) (regarding its causes and consequences), UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education (regarding Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention on education), UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, UN Special Rapporteur on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, UN Special Rapporteur on

the independence of judges and lawyers, and the Working Group on discrimination against woman and girls. Civil society should seek to make submissions before UN treaty bodies and the HRC for countries' human rights reviews and incorporate specific recommendations regarding the overall backlash to women's rights.

Implement the Standards of the Istanbul Convention

- Regardless of whether a country has ratified the Istanbul Convention, civil society should strive to **implement and incorporate its provisions at the domestic level**.
 - <https://endvawnow.org/en/modules/view/8-legislation.html> provides best practice standards on laws on violence against women.
- **Monitor and assess states' compliance** with the Istanbul Convention standards.
- Where countries have ratified the Istanbul Convention and undergone GREVIO monitoring, **use GREVIO's findings and recommendations as a tool to propel reforms**.

TO UN TREATY BODIES, SPECIAL PROCEDURES, AND HRC DELEGATES:

Human Rights Council:

- **Ask the High Commissioner on Human Rights** to monitor and report on the issues pertaining to the Istanbul Convention.
- **Direct the Special Rapporteur on VAW** to compile information and to report to the HRC on the issue.
- **Convene a Panel Debate** on the issue at the next HRC session or include a panel discussion on the issue during the next Annual Discussion on the human rights of women.
- **Consider the issue under Agenda 8:** Follow-up to and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.
- **Adopt a resolution** condemning the backlash against the Istanbul Convention.

Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council:

- **Special Procedures mandate holders should request country visits** to countries that have withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention or that are threatening to do so to examine the impacts on girls and women.

- When developing recommendations for states in annual, thematic, and/or country visit reports, **incorporate recommendations relevant to the backlash against the Istanbul Convention**, including recommendations to:
 - Repeal laws that act to suppress civil society and freedom of expression; and
 - Redirect focus from protecting the so-called “rights of the family” to equal rights within the family, protection and support of the family, and individual rights to security and life.
- **Continue to monitor the issue and make additional UN Joint Statements of concern** such as the statement in response to Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.⁹⁴⁰
- **Prioritize the issue for a joint thematic report** and put out a call for inputs.

Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Mechanism – Human Rights Council Members:

- When developing recommendations for states’ UPRs, **incorporate recommendations relevant to the backlash against the Istanbul Convention**, including recommendations to:
 - Repeal laws that act to suppress civil society and freedom of expression; and
 - Redirect focus from protecting the so-called “rights of the family” to equal rights within the family, protection and support of the family, and individual rights to security and life.

Treaty Bodies:

- **Include questions at the List of Issues/List of Issues Prior to Reporting stage** about the status of the Istanbul Convention and ensure the constructive dialogue with the State Party includes the issues concerning the Istanbul Convention.
- When developing concluding observations for States Parties under review, **incorporate recommendations relevant to the backlash against the Istanbul Convention**, including recommendations to:
 - Repeal laws that act to suppress civil society and freedom of expression; and
 - Redirect focus from protecting the so-called “rights of the family” to equal rights within the family, protection and support of the family, and individual rights to security and life.
- **In concluding observations, identify the issue as a matter of priority** for follow-up in one to two years.

- **Consider the issue during a half-day or full day of general discussion** on the topic.

OHCHR Country and Regional Offices:

- **Local country and regional OHCHR offices should allocate funding, training, and technical assistance** in order to build the capacity of human rights defenders to resist and counteract the backlash against the Istanbul Convention and to promote public awareness about the Istanbul Convention.

TO FUNDERS:

- **Recognize the scope and depth of the problem in the countries** where you are funding. This includes sharing with grantees your understanding that the work is long-term.⁹⁴¹
- **Provide appropriate and sustainable funding for your grantees** to be able to adequately respond to the backlash in addition to serving the needs of victims. This includes long-term, flexible funding that supports general operations and core funding.⁹⁴²
- **Provide funding to support narratives** that use innovative human rights messaging, are contextualized, and take into account the factors motivating the opposition.⁹⁴³
- **Invest in building the capacity**, in particular on communications and networks, in the reviewed countries, as well as **engaging investigative journalists** to highlight the issue pertaining to the Istanbul Convention and opposition actors.⁹⁴⁴
- **Provide funding to NGOs to work on addressing the sub-issues** connected to the backlash.
- **Provide funding for grantees to highlight faith-based organizations and leaders** that promote LGBTI, women, and children’s rights.⁹⁴⁵
- **Prioritize work with local governments and institutions, youth, and diverse stakeholders**, with a view to inclusivity of trans movements.⁹⁴⁶

TO THE EUROPEAN UNION:

(The following recommendations are from the European Women’s Lobby report, *Towards a Europe Free from Male Violence against Women and Girls*)⁹⁴⁷

- **Pursue efforts for the EU to accede to the Istanbul Convention.**

- **Adopt a comprehensive EU-wide strategy, action plan and legislation** on preventing and combating violence against women and girls in Europe. The plan should:
 - Combat all forms of violence against women and girls as a eurocrime;
 - Develop an assessment of the existing and needed legal framework to protect women from all forms of violence and ensure compliance with relevant international standards;
 - Review current legislation on women and girls' rights including Directive 2012/29/EU, Directive (Recast) 2006/54/EC and migration policies to ensure compliance with international and Istanbul Convention standards;
 - Adopt a directive on violence against women that strengthens prevention and victim protection, incorporates a strong gender perspective, and takes into account international instruments on women and girls' rights;
 - Appoint an EU Coordinator on ending violence against women and girls that has a strong political mandate, adequate resources, and the authority to coordinate implementation of the Istanbul Convention, an EU Action Plan on male violence against women and girls, and a directive on violence against women and girls;
 - Ensure the continued mandate of a standalone, full-time anti-trafficking coordinator;
 - Strengthen the financial capacity of women's NGOs and foster alliances across various sectors;
 - Monitor implementation of Directive 2012/29/EU on Victims' Rights and support legislative changes aligned with the Istanbul Convention;
 - Allocate EU funds toward feminist research on violence against women and distribute sustainable funding to support women's rights, ending discrimination against women and male violence, and women's organizations;
 - Ensure that programs under the 2021-2027 Multi Financial Framework and Next Generation EU regularly consult with women's organizations; and
 - Ensure that victims' human rights and safety are centered in all activities that address violence against women and girls.⁹⁴⁸

To GOVERNMENTS:

- **Ratify the Istanbul Convention without delay** and encourage other country allies to do the same;
- **Adequately fund and consult with NGOs** serving victims of violence against women in the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. These NGOs best know and understand victims' needs and should have a leadership role in the implementation of the convention;
- Until the Istanbul Convention is ratified, **take steps to implement the provisions of the Istanbul Convention**, other international standards as outlined by CEDAW and the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, and best practices as outlined in the UN Women Virtual Knowledge Centre to End Violence against Women and girls (www.endvawnow.org) and the UN Handbook for Legislation on Violence against Women and Girls;
- **Ensure that government officials publicly denounce threats and attacks** against human rights defenders;
- **Pass and implement laws that specifically protect human rights defenders** and ensure that laws and any implementing mechanisms are gender-sensitive and monitored and modified as needed to improve their effectiveness;
- **Ensure human rights defenders and civil society have the right to complain** about activities of authorities and government bodies, and;
- **Ensure a prompt, effective, and impartial investigation into threats, attacks, and harassment of human rights defenders.**

To ANY SUPPORTERS OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

If you have 10 minutes

- **Learn the facts.** Visit <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/leaflets1> to learn more about the Istanbul Convention.
- **Read the news.** Stay abreast of developments, including ratifications and threats of withdrawal, regarding the Istanbul Convention.
- **Vote.** Exercise your right to vote and support local officials and parliamentarians who advocate for human rights.
- **Tag and thank supporters of the Istanbul Convention publicly on social media.** Reinforce and publicize positive promotion of the convention by European

Commission members, national officials, faith-based leaders, academics, media, and other stakeholders through social media platforms.

- **Donate.** Give to a local NGO that serves women victims of violence.
- **Join a group.** Become a fan or join a Facebook, Twitter, or other social networking group that addresses a human rights issue.
- **Use a hashtag.** Use #IstanbulConventionSavesLives in your social media.
- **Sign a petition.** Sign the petition urging Turkey not to withdraw from the convention here: <https://www.change.org/p/sign-to-support-women-in-turkey-who-ask-the-proper-implementation-of-laws-to-protect-women>.

If you have a few hours:

- **Vote.** Exercise your right to vote and support local officials and parliamentarians who advocate for human rights.
- **Write a letter.** Write to your government representatives urging ratification, non-withdrawal, or implementation of the Istanbul Convention depending on country conditions.
- **March.** Take part in local marches, protests, and demonstrations on human rights issues.
- **Write an opinion piece** for publication in your local media or to post on your own social media.

If you have a month:

- **Educate.** Tell your friends, family, and colleagues about the Istanbul Convention and its importance in saving women's lives. Create an educational mural, poster or flyer with statistics, stories, and other attention-grabbing information on a human rights issue. Distribute it in your city, school, or workplace.
- **Start a discussion group.** Talk about the Istanbul Convention and women's rights and consider centering topics around books on women's equality and human rights.
- **Ask the experts.** Invite a speaker who supports the Istanbul Convention to present before your discussion group, student club, or workplace.
- **Hold a fundraiser.** Organize an event to raise money and awareness for a local NGO. Ideas include a bake sale, music concert, photo exhibit, car wash, pancake

breakfast, silent auction, walkathon, art show, bingo night, or anything that sounds fun for you and your community.

If you have a year or more:

- **Volunteer.** Donate your time and talent with a local women’s NGO, shelter, or hotline. If you lack time, check with local NGOs for goods and other donations they may need.
- **Start a blog.** Highlight women’s human rights issues, current events, and recent developments on the Istanbul Convention

⁹³⁷ Martinez, Duarte, and Colombia, “Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights,” 103.

⁹³⁸ Colette Bennett, “Top 17 Exposures to Learn New Words,” *ThoughtCo* (July 29, 2019), <https://www.thoughtco.com/vocabulary-reps-4135612>.

⁹³⁹ Valentina Andrasek and Natalia Vilcu, “Advancing Towards the Ratification and Implementation of the Istanbul Convention: Good Practices from States Parties” (Sept. 2020), 10, <https://rm.coe.int/good-practices-in-the-progress-of-ratification-en/16809feffc>.

⁹⁴⁰ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Turkey: Withdrawal from Istanbul Convention Is a Pushback against Women’s Rights, Say Human Rights Experts,” *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner News Website* (Mar. 23, 2021), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26936&LangID=E>.

⁹⁴¹ *Id.* at 103.

⁹⁴² *Id.* at 102.

⁹⁴³ *Id.* at 104.

⁹⁴⁴ *Id.* at 103-4.

⁹⁴⁵ *Id.* at 105.

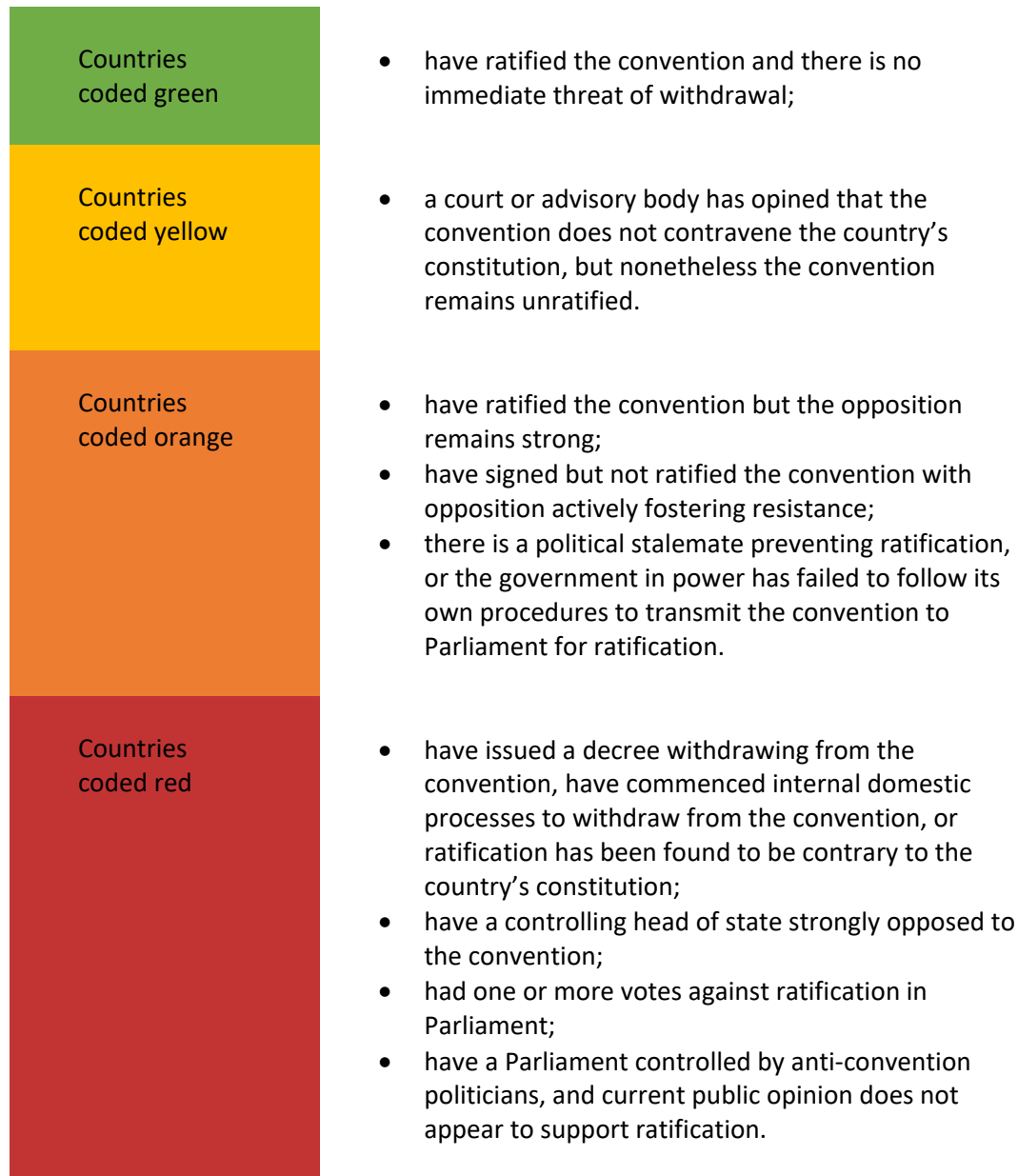
⁹⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁹⁴⁷ European Women’s Lobby, “Towards a Europe Free from Male Violence against Women and Girls – Marking 10 Years of the Istanbul Convention,” *European Women’s Lobby, Reports* (Apr. 21, 2021), 31-32, <https://womenlobby.org/reports?lang=en>.

⁹⁴⁸ European Women’s Lobby, “Towards a Europe Free from Male Violence against Women and Girls – Marking 10 Years of the Istanbul Convention,” 31-32.

APPENDIX A: ASSESSMENT OF REVIEWED COUNTRIES' ISTANBUL CONVENTION RATIFICATION STATUS

The following is an assessment of the 14 reviewed countries' progress toward ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the possibility of their withdrawal from the treaty, divided into green, yellow, orange, and red countries. Progress toward implementation of the convention is beyond the scope of this report; therefore, this chart does not address countries' implementation of the Istanbul Convention.



Country	Status
<p>Armenia</p> <p>Yellow</p>	<p>The Armenian Government signed the Istanbul Convention in 2016.⁹⁴⁹ When the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs announced the government’s intention to ratify the convention in May 2019, the opposition increased its efforts to derail ratification.⁹⁵⁰ On July 26, 2019, the Armenian Apostolic Church formally voiced its opposition, and stated, among other things, the inaccurate assertion that the convention “defines a third sex apart from male and female.”⁹⁵¹ Four days later, the Ministry of Justice issued a statement to counter the misinformation spread by the opposition, reinforcing the ministry’s support for ratification. The Ministry of Justice also announced that the government was requesting the Venice Commission to issue an opinion on the “constitutional implications” of the convention.⁹⁵² An Armenian human rights defender (HRD) described the Ministers of Justice and Labor and Social Affairs’ support for the convention as both “courageous” and “important.”⁹⁵³ On October 14, 2019, the Venice Commission issued its opinion confirming the constitutionality of the Istanbul Convention under the Armenian Constitution.⁹⁵⁴ More than 24 months after this decision, however, the Armenian government has yet to present the convention to parliament for ratification.⁹⁵⁵</p>
<p>Bulgaria</p> <p>Red</p>	<p>At the beginning of January 2018, the opposition launched a well-organized, social media-driven campaign to derail Parliament’s anticipated ratification of the convention.⁹⁵⁶ By February, Parliamentarians opposing the convention had referred the matter to the Bulgarian Constitutional Court.⁹⁵⁷ In a highly criticized opinion issued in July 2018, Bulgaria’s Constitutional Court declared the Istanbul Convention unconstitutional.⁹⁵⁸ The four dissenting (male) judges declared the majority’s ruling “ideologically charged, serving political interests, and succumbing to public opinion and pressure in an unprecedented way.”⁹⁵⁹ The dissent argued that convention is in agreement with the letter and the spirit of Bulgaria’s Constitution.⁹⁶⁰ While the Constitutional Court decision impedes ratification for now, civil society continues to work to promote safety and protection for women in Bulgaria.⁹⁶¹ Civil society urges the Bulgarian Government to acknowledge there is no legal obstacle for the Constitutional Court to adopt a new decision recognizing that the norms of the Istanbul Convention are in accordance with the Bulgarian Constitution, as well as incorporate the provisions of the Istanbul Convention into domestic law even without ratification.⁹⁶²</p>
<p>Croatia</p> <p>Orange</p>	<p>Croatia ratified the convention on June 12, 2018, in the face of a significant opposition campaign.⁹⁶³ The opposition has since continued a relentless campaign against so-called “gender ideology,” the Istanbul Convention, and other sexual and reproductive rights. The opposition appears to have ample resources to continue this fight. The opposition against the convention appear to have ties to Croatia’s dominant Roman Catholic Church, certain government officials and politicians, and religiously-oriented NGOs, including In the Name of the Family (<i>U ime Obitelji</i>), Vigilare, Vigilare Foundation, and the Croatian office of Ordo Iuris.⁹⁶⁴ While the opposition’s efforts to secure a</p>

	<p>referendum seeking withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention failed in 2019,⁹⁶⁵ In the Name of the Family led an earlier successful constitutional referendum to redefine marriage as the union between a man and a woman.⁹⁶⁶ As with civil society in other countries, Croatia’s women’s groups have demonstrated resilience and creativity. For example, they have led highly visible protests against the opposition dressed in the dystopian costumes associated with Margaret Atwood’s <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i>.⁹⁶⁷</p>
<p>Czech Republic Orange</p>	<p>While the Czech Republic has signed the convention,⁹⁶⁸ efforts to ratify it have stalled within the government. According to Czech HRDs, the Roman Catholic Church paved the way for the opposition starting with a 2018 sermon by priest Monsignor Pit’ha that mischaracterized the convention’s goals.⁹⁶⁹ The Czech President and the head of the Roman Catholic Church supported Monsignor Pit’ha and the incorrect assertions he made about the convention.⁹⁷⁰ On May 13, 2021, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, along with the other three Visegrad states of Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, signed a document entitled “Declaration Pro Familia” that promotes the family as fundamental to society.⁹⁷¹ Many worry that it is a new tactic by these governments to push a regressive far-right agenda in the EU to attack and restrict women’s and LGBTI rights and replace “gender mainstreaming” with “family mainstreaming.”⁹⁷²</p>
<p>Hungary Red</p>	<p>Hungary signed the convention in 2014.⁹⁷³ Hungary’s policies, however, substitute family-centered policies for gender equality, while seeking to limit reproductive rights.⁹⁷⁴ In May 2020, the Hungarian Parliament voted against ratification of the Istanbul Convention (115 supporting non-ratification, 35 opposing, and 3 abstentions). The government issued a statement that the convention promotes “destructive gender ideologies” and “illegal migration.”⁹⁷⁵ As a Hungarian HRD explained, the opposition to the Istanbul Convention is the government.⁹⁷⁶ Hungarian President Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have become progressively more authoritarian, dismantling democratic institutions, suppressing NGO activities, and openly departing from EU norms on academic freedom, media pluralism, judicial independence, and the treatment of refugees.⁹⁷⁷ Orbán announced that he wants to build a new right-wing alliance for those “who do not want migrants, who do not want multiculturalism, who have not descended into LGBTQ lunacy.”⁹⁷⁸ The likelihood that Hungary will ratify the Istanbul Convention appears slim. Nevertheless, women’s HRDs are struggling to implement the standards of the Istanbul Convention even without ratification. Hungary joined with the other three Visegrad states and signed the Declaration Pro Familia on May 13, 2021.⁹⁷⁹ Many speculate that signing the declaration is a move to restrict women’s and LGBTI rights in the EU and replace “gender mainstreaming” with “family mainstreaming.”⁹⁸⁰</p>
<p>Italy Green</p>	<p>Italy’s senate unanimously approved the convention, making Italy one of the first ten countries to ratify the convention.⁹⁸¹ Opposition to sexual and reproductive rights, however, is widespread and has hindered implementation of the Istanbul Convention.⁹⁸² GREVIO attributes Italy’s resistance to implementation, at least in part, to a “tendency to reinterpret and refocus gender-equality in terms of family and motherhood policies.”⁹⁸³ Women’s NGOs are more direct in their assessment of the situation; for them, the problem resides in “deeply rooted gender stereotypes and widespread</p>

	<p>sexism.”⁹⁸⁴ Women, including working women, face online harassment and hate crimes. In particular, female journalists are exposed to hate attacks based on their gender. In some cases, women journalists have stopped publishing online and even required police protection. This violence disproportionately affects women journalists and impacts their presence in the media and reporting.⁹⁸⁵ Far-right, populist political parties, such as Lega, that support the “traditional family” and the World Congress of Families⁹⁸⁶ contribute to the negative environment, as do many opposition NGOs, such as Fondazione Novae Terrae,⁹⁸⁷ Pro Vita & Famiglia,⁹⁸⁸ and the far-right political think tank, Dignitatis Humanae Institute.⁹⁸⁹</p>
<p>Latvia Yellow</p>	<p>Latvia has signed but not ratified the Istanbul Convention. The opposition, which includes Latvia’s churches and the conservative parties in Latvia’s five-party center-right coalition, is gaining ground.⁹⁹⁰ In November 2019, when the EU called upon Latvia to ratify the convention, the opposition succeeded in excluding ratification from the government’s agenda.⁹⁹¹ In August 2020, 21 parliamentarians started a legal proceeding with the Latvian Constitutional Court to determine the Istanbul Convention’s constitutionality.⁹⁹² The Constitutional Court initiated the case on August 5, 2020.⁹⁹³ On June 4, 2021, the Court ruled that the Istanbul Convention is in compliance with Latvia’s Constitution.⁹⁹⁴ With this decision, legal obstacles to ratification are removed, and ratification is now a question of political will.</p>
<p>Lithuania Yellow</p>	<p>Lithuania has signed but not ratified the Istanbul Convention.⁹⁹⁵ In 2018, the Lithuanian Social Security and Labor Ministry proposed postponing ratification until a compromise could be reached on the concept of “gender.”⁹⁹⁶ Since then, resistance to ratification has kept ratification on hold.⁹⁹⁷ In 2019, as part of Lithuania’s review under CEDAW, Lithuanian representatives explained there was no political will to ratify the Istanbul Convention.⁹⁹⁸ It appeared that ratification would be added to Parliament’s agenda for spring 2021. Due to the resulting public resistance to the debate surrounding the convention, ratification of the convention was not on Parliament’s spring agenda.⁹⁹⁹</p>
<p>Moldova Yellow</p>	<p>Moldova signed the Istanbul Convention in 2017, and Parliament ratified it in October 2021.¹⁰⁰⁰ The CoE treaty website does not yet reflect completion of the treaty formalities required to reflect official treaty ratification¹⁰⁰¹ but PACE has congratulated Moldova as the 35th country to ratify the convention.¹⁰⁰² Nonetheless, the opposition remains strong. When the Moldovan Parliament voted to ratify the convention, the Metropolitan Church of Chişinău made a statement opposing ratification, stating it “destroys Christian values and traditions” and “legalizes same-sex marriage.”¹⁰⁰³ Three factors drive the opposition to the convention in Moldova: a highly patriarchal culture,¹⁰⁰⁴ the influence of the Moldovan Orthodox Church,¹⁰⁰⁵ which is “under the patriarchal Russian Orthodox Church;”¹⁰⁰⁶ and the pro-Russian, pro-traditional family, pro-World Congress of Families, anti-EU former President Dodon and his followers.¹⁰⁰⁷ Dodon, who was president until 2020, exemplifies “a patriarchal mindset” according to one HRD.¹⁰⁰⁸ In 2018, domestic violence ranked at the bottom of the Dodon Government’s priorities.¹⁰⁰⁹</p>

	<p>Before Moldova’s current woman president, Maia Sandu, came to office at the end of 2020, one HRD explained they “could not see a willingness on behalf of State representatives to ratify the Istanbul Convention.”¹⁰¹⁰ President Sandu stated her intention to support European integration,¹⁰¹¹ but her efforts were blocked for months by a Parliament dominated by Dodon supporters.¹⁰¹² President Sandu called for new elections on July 11, 2021 after the Constitutional Court confirmed her ability to do so.¹⁰¹³ President Sandu’s pro-European party, the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), came in first by a wide margin.¹⁰¹⁴ With 63 of 101 parliamentary seats and a clear majority,¹⁰¹⁵ the election outcome should facilitate the way for a reformist agenda.¹⁰¹⁶ Though opposition remains vocal, the vote to ratify the convention shortly after the election suggests there is potential for more progressive change in the future.</p>
<p>Poland Red</p>	<p>Since 2012, opposition to the Istanbul Convention by the Roman Catholic Church, right-wing politicians, the PiS political party, other right-wing political parties, the NGO Ordo Iuris, and others has prevailed in Poland.¹⁰¹⁷ Despite these opposition forces, Poland signed the Istanbul Convention in 2012 and ratified it in 2015.¹⁰¹⁸ When the PiS party came to power in 2015, opposition from Members of Parliament and government officials led Justice Minister Ziobro to file a request with the Ministry of Family, Work, and Social Policy on June 26, 2020 to initiate proceedings to withdraw Poland from the Istanbul Convention.¹⁰¹⁹ In July 2020, Prime Minister Morawiecki asked the Constitutional Tribunal to assess the constitutionality of the Istanbul Convention.¹⁰²⁰ In August 2020, Ordo Iuris registered a citizen’s petition, “Yes to the Family, No to Gender” to instigate Parliament’s consideration of a law that would direct the government to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention and instead to adopt Ordo Iuris’ proposed alternative, the so-called “Convention on the Rights of the Family.”¹⁰²¹ In January 2021, after Ordo Iuris had collected the requisite number of signatures, it presented the petition for the draft law to Parliament.¹⁰²² Parliament did not vote to reject the draft law¹⁰²³ and referred it to the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Justice and Human Rights Committee for review.¹⁰²⁴ Poland has not yet officially withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention, but efforts to achieve withdrawal are ongoing. The Polish government has also started a diplomatic effort to convince neighboring countries to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Family.¹⁰²⁵ In line with its support of the opposition’s version of “traditional family values,” the Minister of Family and Social Policy, along with the other three Visegrad states, signed the Declaration Pro Familia on May 13, 2021.¹⁰²⁶ As in the other three Visegrad states, many speculate joining the declaration is a move to restrict women’s and LGBTI rights in the EU and replace “gender mainstreaming” with “family mainstreaming.”¹⁰²⁷</p>
<p>Romania Green</p>	<p>Romania ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2016.¹⁰²⁸ According to a Romanian HRD, the general public had little awareness of the convention or its terms.¹⁰²⁹ Romania is undergoing its first review by GREVIO, with an evaluation visit scheduled for July 5-9, 2021 and expected evaluation report publication in 2022.¹⁰³⁰ In 2015, the Coalition for the Family began pushing measures to limit sexual and reproductive rights. The NGO coalition is supported by the Orthodox Church, opposes “gender,” and argues “there is</p>

	<p>no violence in the Romanian traditional family.”¹⁰³¹ A Romanian HRD explained the Church advances “the ancient model” of the traditional family.¹⁰³² The Coalition for the Family sought a constitutional referendum to change the definition of marriage to a union between a man and woman,¹⁰³³ a move supported by the Orthodox Church that ultimately failed.¹⁰³⁴ The Orthodox Church is vocal in opposing “gender” as an “impure ideology” that is “toxic to the community body of any society.”¹⁰³⁵ In 2020, the “anti-gender” opposition in the Romanian Parliament adopted a law that banned “activities aimed at spreading gender identity theory or opinion” in educational settings.”¹⁰³⁶ Romania’s President referred the law to Romania’s Constitutional Court for an opinion.¹⁰³⁷ In December 2020, the Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the law as unconstitutional.¹⁰³⁸ HRDs, however, remain concerned in light of strong opposition to the convention and women’s rights.¹⁰³⁹ According to a HRD defender, it is “the silence before the storm. We know the storm is coming.”¹⁰⁴⁰</p>
<p>Slovakia Red</p>	<p>Slovakia’s Parliament has rejected ratification of the Istanbul Convention three times since 2019.¹⁰⁴¹ In February 2020, Members of Parliament voted against ratification of the convention for the third time, with 96 of the 113 lawmakers present rejecting ratification.¹⁰⁴² Since then ratification has been at a standstill.¹⁰⁴³ On May 13, 2021, the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, along with the other three Visegrad states, signed the Declaration Pro Familia.¹⁰⁴⁴ As in the other Visegrad Four states, many speculate joining the declaration is a move to restrict women’s and LGBTI rights in the EU and replace “gender mainstreaming” with “family mainstreaming.”¹⁰⁴⁵</p>
<p>Turkey Red</p>	<p>In Turkey, the policies and rhetoric of President Erdoğan have eroded secular society, freedom of the press, the rule of law, human rights, and women’s rights.¹⁰⁴⁶ Simultaneously, violence against women, especially femicides, have risen significantly in recent years.¹⁰⁴⁷ Opposition to the Istanbul Convention began to appear in Turkey in 2019,¹⁰⁴⁸ accompanied by demands to revoke Turkey’s Law 6248 on violence against women.¹⁰⁴⁹ In the summer of 2020, President Erdoğan and his ruling AK Party signaled their intention to withdraw from the convention and annul Turkey’s law on violence against women.¹⁰⁵⁰ Widespread protests erupted across the country.¹⁰⁵¹ In response, the AK Party and government backpedaled. It announced in August 2020 that the law on violence against women would remain in force.¹⁰⁵² Istanbul Convention withdrawal, however, would remain under consideration.¹⁰⁵³ On March 19, 2021, President Erdoğan signed a one-paragraph degree withdrawing Turkey from the Istanbul Convention,¹⁰⁵⁴ effective July 1, 2021.¹⁰⁵⁵ Erdoğan’s decree became public in the early hours of March 20, 2021,¹⁰⁵⁶ making Turkey the first country to sign, ratify, and withdraw from the Istanbul Convention.¹⁰⁵⁷ Turkey’s withdrawal announcement drew immediate condemnation from within Turkey and the CoE, EU, other states, and international organizations.¹⁰⁵⁸ Erdoğan insisted his decision on withdrawal was final¹⁰⁵⁹ and ignored calls for the decision’s reversal.¹⁰⁶⁰ Within Turkey, the Republican People’s Party immediately challenged the decree’s constitutionality in the Council of State administrative court.¹⁰⁶¹ Because Turkey’s Constitution requires</p>

	<p>human rights treaties to be approved by Parliament, as was the case with the Istanbul Convention, convention supporters asserted that withdrawal was not constitutional without Parliamentary approval.¹⁰⁶² On June 30, in a three-to-two decision, the Council of State confirmed Erdoğan's power to unilaterally withdraw from international treaties,¹⁰⁶³ thereby solidifying Turkey's withdrawal on July 1, 2021.¹⁰⁶⁴</p> <p>On July 1, Erdoğan announced a new national action plan to combat violence against women covering actions to be taken from 2021 to 2025.¹⁰⁶⁵ The first of the plan's five objectives is to revise Turkey's legislation on violence against women.¹⁰⁶⁶ Since withdrawal, some conservative voices have continued to oppose Turkey's law on violence against women.¹⁰⁶⁷ Recently, Parliamentarians and members of opposition parties resigned from a Parliamentary Commission to Explore Causes of Violence Against Women that Erdoğan had formed on March 7, 2021. They stated they were being made "pawns" to justify withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, the Commission's goals were to undermine the rights of women, and its members included those who supported underage marriage.¹⁰⁶⁸</p>
<p>Ukraine Orange</p>	<p>Ukraine has signed but not ratified the Istanbul Convention.¹⁰⁶⁹ The situation in Ukraine is complicated by several factors, including Russia's efforts to exclude Ukraine from the EU and Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea. Misinformation about the Istanbul Convention, such as the myth that it legalizes same-sex marriages, has led both anti-EU and pro-EU groups to oppose ratification of the convention.¹⁰⁷⁰ Ukraine's women's organizations presented a citizens' petition to President Zelensky in May 2020 calling for ratification.¹⁰⁷¹ There appears to be a stalemate between the President and the Ministries. On the one hand, the President blamed his Ministries, stating he would submit the convention to Parliament once the relevant Ministries submit the required documentation. On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated it is prepared to submit the convention for ratification as soon as the executive branch transmits the relevant documents. As of July 2020, observers viewed President Zelensky as responsible for taking the next step.¹⁰⁷² Yet, Ukraine's women are still waiting for the convention to be submitted to Parliament for ratification.</p>

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The Advocates for Human Rights works to change systems and conditions that cause human rights abuses, improve laws and lives throughout the world, represent individual victims of human rights violations, and fight injustice, The Advocates develops partnerships and mobilizes volunteers to address some of the most pressing issues of our time because we believe that everyone has the power and responsibility to advance human rights.

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