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## Combating domestic violence Romania, 26-27 April 2023

### Comments paper – Croatia



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# Combating domestic violence in Croatia

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## 1. Country Context

The Republic of Croatia, in accordance with the recommendations of the European Union and the provisions of international treaties on the protection of human rights, undertakes a number of measures, like improvement of the legislative and strategic framework. This relates also to the development of national documents that prescribe measures to be taken for prevention, protection of victims, helping perpetrators to change their behaviour, while strengthening interdepartmental cooperation as a prerequisite for quick and effective action in order to protect the victim, and work on prevention violence.

Since 2000, comprehensive combat against violence against women and domestic violence has taken place in the Republic of Croatia. Family violence has been for the first time defined by the Criminal Code, and thus for the first time in the Croatian criminal legislation, as a criminal offence committed by a family member who brings another family member into a degrading position by the use of violence, abuse or another particularly disrespectful behaviour. Before this criminal offence was stipulated, violent behaviour as a misdemeanour offence was prohibited under the Family Act, which explicitly prescribed that violent behaviour of a spouse or any adult family member is prohibited in the family.

Furthermore, the adoption of the first Act on Protection against Domestic Violence in 2003, led to certain improvements in the field of combating domestic violence by prescribing the purpose of the Act, which includes prevention, sanctioning, and suppression of all types of domestic violence, application of appropriate measures against perpetrators and mitigation of consequences of committed violence by providing protection and assistance to victims of violence.

At the same time, the first Gender Equality Act and the Anti-Discrimination Act were the foundations of protection against gender-based discrimination and the creation of equal opportunities for women and men. Pursuant to the provisions of the Gender Equality Act (2003), the Government of the Republic of Croatia established the Office for Gender Equality in early 2004, and in 2003, the Office of the Gender Equality Ombudsperson was established as an independent body for combating discrimination in the field of gender equality.

It is important to mention that gender equality is one of the highest values of the Constitutional order of the Republic of Croatia and it means that women and men are equally present in all areas of public and private life, that they have equal status, equal

opportunities to exercise all rights, as well as equal benefit from the achieved results. The Republic of Croatia shows a high degree of awareness of the necessity of preventing discrimination against any person, and the Constitution itself, in its articles, pays special attention to the protection of human rights, the suppression of discrimination and the prevention of abuse, and prescribes that all persons are equal before the law and that everyone is guaranteed equal rights and freedoms regardless of multiple categories such as race, skin colour, gender, language, religion, and others, and that no one should be subjected to any form of abuse. Over the past twenty years, a legislative-strategic anti-discrimination framework has been established in Croatia and institutional mechanisms for gender equality have been formed.

## 2. Policy Debate

On the basis of international as well as national obligations, national strategic plans are adopted to improve the position of women and establish gender equality, as well as to combat all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence. The Government of the Republic of Croatia promotes the application of gender perspectives in policymaking, and thus measures for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in various policies and strategies, such as i.e.:

- National Strategy for protection against domestic violence for the period 2017-2022 → the new act of strategic planning is currently being drafted: National Plan for protection against violence against women and domestic violence for the period until 2028;
- National Plan for the suppression of sexual violence and sexual harassment for the period until 2027;
- National Plan for the gender equality for the period 2022-2027;
- National Roma Inclusion Plan for the period 2021-2027;
- National Plan for Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities for the Period 2021-2027;
- National Plan for the development of social services for the period 2021-2027.

### **National Plan for protection against violence against women and domestic violence**

This act of strategic planning is currently being drafted, since the National Strategy for protection against domestic violence, that has been continuously in force since 2005, expired in 2022. Namely, in the Republic of Croatia, four National Strategies have been adopted, covering the periods of 2005-2007, 2008-2010, 2011-2016, and 2017-2022. As a coordinating body Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy has formed an interdepartmental working group to work on measures as according to the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention: prevention, protection,

prosecution and co-ordinated policies. The former strategy contained measures covering 7 areas of activities: Prevention of domestic violence, Legislative framework in the field of protection against domestic violence, Care and support for victims of domestic violence, Psychosocial treatment of perpetrators of domestic violence, Improving cross-sectoral cooperation, Training of professionals working in the field of protection against domestic violence and Raising awareness among the general public about domestic violence. The objectives of the National Plan that is being developed are to continue to develop programmes for the prevention of domestic violence and violence against women, while ensuring consistent application of the provisions of the Convention, further harmonising Croatian legislation with the requirements of international documents, providing housing care for victims of domestic violence, providing financial support to shelters and counselling centres for victims of domestic violence and the civil society organisations. Also, measures foresee activities in providing training for professionals working in the field of protection against violence, at the same time raising awareness among the general public about violence and its negative effects for society and to improve cross-sectoral cooperation.

### **National Plan for the Suppression of Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment**

*The National Plan for the Suppression of Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment for the Period until 2027* was adopted in 2022. The aim of this national plan, based on the provisions of the Convention, is to include comprehensive and coordinated action to ensure and maintain conditions in a society in which citizens will be safe, taken care of and protected from all forms of sexual violence and sexual harassment. The National Plan lays on 3 pillars, defined as specific goals: Prevention; Improving care and ensuring the availability of victim support services and Achieving a deterrent effect on perpetrators of sexual violence and sexual harassment. Key components or areas of intervention in this Plan are: - development of prevention especially through educational activities in many different sectors and also through the awareness raising activities, - additional training of professionals working with victims of sexual violence and sexual harassment, - improvement in providing protection and support to the victims of sexual violence and sexual harassment, - working with perpetrators of sexual violence and sexual harassment and providing an improved psychosocial treatment for perpetrators, - development of public policies.

It should be noted that the cross-sectoral approach was taken into account in drafting all the documents, and every process understands a working group that includes representatives of competent state bodies, ministries and government offices, representatives of civil society organisations who operate with the aim of protecting women victims against all forms of violence, representatives of academia, representatives of cities and counties, civil society organisations.

While being fully aware of the fact that women are mostly victims of various forms of gender-based violence, from domestic violence to sexual violence, many reports point out that victims of domestic violence can be men and boys. Available statistics point to the fact that women are victims of violence in most cases, but state bodies are

providing assistance and ensure equal access to services for all victims, regardless of gender.

### **National Plan for the Development of Social Services**

Within the framework of the National Plan for the Development of Social Services for the period 2021-2027, a special chapter is dedicated to the availability of social services in the Republic of Croatia for particularly vulnerable groups with an emphasis on victims of domestic violence and victims of human trafficking. According to the provisions of this National Plan, the goal is to increase the scope of provision of non-institutional services in areas where these services are insufficient in order to ensure a regionally more even distribution of non-institutional services in accordance with established needs and priorities in order to prevent institutionalization.

## **3. Good Practices**

In the state budget of the Republic of Croatia, various positions and activities of state bodies provide financial resources for the fight against all forms of violence.

### **Shelters**

The Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy has provided financial resources to support 23 out of 25 shelters for victims of domestic violence through tenders, contracting in the social welfare network and through EU funds. Out of a total of 25 shelters for victims of domestic violence in the Republic of Croatia with a currently available capacity of 357 beds, 8 shelters are run by women's non-governmental organizations/autonomous women's shelters, 6 by civil society organizations, 5 by religious institutions, and the other 6 by other providers. accommodation service, i.e. red cross and homes/institutions. The accommodation service for victims of violence is provided in all counties of the Republic of Croatia, and the services are free for users, and the addresses of the shelters are secret.

### **Financial support**

For many years, the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy has been providing financial support to victims of domestic violence through the tender system, in the network of social welfare services, directly from the state budget and through the EU funds. Since 2012, through three-year programmes, the Ministry has been financing women's non-governmental organisations that provide counselling services and shelters for women and children victims of domestic violence in the amount of approximately €280,000 annually. Since 2019, the Ministry has funded associations that provide counselling services for victims of domestic violence in the Republic of Croatia and since 2021 counselling centres for victims of sexual violence on a project/tender basis, in the annual amount of approximately €400,000.

### **SOS telephone**

In the Republic of Croatia, there are a total of 7 SOS telephone numbers for victims of domestic violence run by civil society organizations. Phones are available from 0-24 hours. For many years, the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social

Policy has co-financed the operation of 6 SOS telephones through projects of shelters and counselling centres for victims of domestic violence. From November 25, 2020, with the financial support of the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family Social Policy, the operation of a free 24-hour telephone line 7 days a week, i.e. the National Call Centre (116 006), including weekends, holidays and public holidays, is ensured, on which victims and witnesses can get the necessary advice and help. Until this date, the national call centre was available to users from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

### **Cooperation with NGOs**

Civil society organisations in the Republic of Croatia are an important link in the overall system of the fight against violence. Civil society organisations that work in the field of protection of victims of domestic violence and violence against women in the Republic of Croatia are understood as equal partners of state bodies in designing policy, developing and implementing goals, measures and activities in this area. With their knowledge and experience, experts involved in the work of civil society organizations provide a great contribution when drafting legal and by-laws, strategic and national plans and other documents in the area of protection of victims of violence. At the same time, civil society organisations are bearers or co-bearers of the measures of national documents, and with their dedicated work they contribute to the implementation of the given measures. A particularly important example is the involvement of representatives of civil society organisations in the work of the National and county teams for the prevention and fight against violence against women and domestic violence established after the entry into force of the Istanbul Convention.

### **National and County Teams for the prevention and fight against violence against women and domestic violence**

In November 2018, the ministers responsible for family and social welfare, internal affairs, justice, health, education, administration and foreign and European affairs signed an agreement on interdepartmental cooperation in the field of preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The purpose of the Agreement was the establishment of national and county teams for the prevention and fight against violence against women and domestic violence. The aim was to take the necessary measures for: improving the work of competent state bodies and civil society organisations through the implementation of joint training programmes; ensuring joint and coordinated cooperation in order to effectively prevent and fight against violence against women and domestic violence; comprehensive protection of victims of such violence. The national team and the county teams have the role of bodies that actively participate in the implementation of the measures of the National Strategy for Protection against Domestic Violence and ensure the consistent implementation of the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, encouraging local self-government units and regional (regional) self-government units to introduce a gender budget, which will ensure continuous financial support intended for the operation of shelters and counselling centres for victims of violence against women and domestic violence.

The teams, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, work on a regularly updating the Directory of institutions, organisations and other institutions that provide help, support and protection to victims of domestic violence and ensure its availability to the widest circle of people.

### **Manual with guidelines for reporting on domestic violence**

The Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy has issued a Manual with guidelines for reporting on domestic violence. It contains an overview of the recommendations of the Council of Europe on the portrayal of women in the media, an overview of the laws of the Republic of Croatia that contain provisions on media reporting on domestic violence, myths and facts about violence, examples of good and bad media practice in reporting on violence and guidelines for media reporting on domestic violence. The electronic version of the Manual has been submitted to the Agency for Electronic Media, for further distribution and use in work, and is also available on the Ministry's website.

### **EU project**

Within the framework of the EU project entitled "Let's stop violence against women and violence in the family - There is no excuse for violence", a media campaign was launched in June 2021, with the aim of raising the awareness of professionals and the general public about the importance of preventing violence, the harmfulness and unacceptability of violent behaviour, and advertising was carried out through the media, which is going on continuously.

## **4. Conclusion**

Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy is designated by the Law on Ratification of the Istanbul Convention as the body responsible for coordination, application, supervision and evaluation of policies and measures to prevent and combat all forms of violence covered by the Convention. It coordinates the work of state administration bodies responsible for child and family protection, justice, internal affairs, education and health, as well as state bodies responsible for carrying out work related to the realization of gender equality and the protection of human rights in the Republic of Croatia, in the implementation of all provisions necessary for the prevention of violence and protection of all victims. While implementing the measures from the strategic documents, it coordinates the steps in designating one person in each competent authority as the coordinator of the foreseen measures.

In order to improve interdepartmental cooperation and the need for coordinated action of the competent authorities in solving and preventing risky and crisis situations, the Ministry as a coordinating body recognizes the fact that only joint and coordinated cooperation of all state authorities can act in order to prevent violence and other unacceptable behaviour. Therefore, it is continuously taking activities with the aim of more detailed implementation provisions of the Istanbul Convention by jointly implementing various training programs, programs in cooperation with civil society



organisations, and continuous exchange of relevant data on procedures in cases of domestic violence and violence against women, coordinates activities in regularly marking dates related to activities for prevention of violence, while raising public awareness of the issue of violence against women and domestic violence.