



**CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN'S NETWORK FOR
SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS**

Warsaw, 29 January 2009

His Excellency
Mirek Topolánek
Prime Minister of the Czech Republic

Dear Sir,

On behalf of ASTRA regional network of NGOs I would like to congratulate you on taking the Presidency of the European Union. We are convinced that your term as a President will be beneficial to all EU Member States and the rest of the world. The Czech Republic holding the EU presidency in the first half of 2009 would be a symbol of freedom and optimism, democracy and economic success and international solidarity.

ASTRA is a regional network of NGOs and individuals advocating in a collective voice for sexual and reproductive health and rights in Central and Eastern Europe. Our aim is to raise awareness about women's health and reproductive choices and to build capacity, knowledge and experience of our members and supporters and to improve policy standards in this respect. In our work we pay special attention to young people and other underserved groups. ASTRA is monitoring and reporting the status of implementation of gender-related policies on European Union level.

We wish your Excellency to have the energy and vision to skillfully combine and multiply achievements of the past for the future benefits. During this important time, the Czech Presidency faces many challenges: financial crisis, economic recession, energy challenge and climate change issues plus the parliamentary elections make for a very specific term at the helm of Europe. The Czech Republic will be asked to show responsiveness and leadership. Its term will also be marked by the twentieth anniversary of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and the nomination of the new President of the Commission. The schedule is also pre-determined by the Lisbon Treaty: choosing the new European Council President as well as the EU Foreign Minister might be on the agenda.

The motto of the Czech Presidency, "Europe without Barriers", reflects the four basic freedoms: the free movement of goods, capital, workers, and services.

Together with the French and the Swedish Presidencies, the Czech Republic will also concentrate on the financial impact of demographic changes and on the need for innovation, aiming to maintain a high quality of health services provision and to ensure access to these services.

ASTRA welcomes this effort as well as supports the Presidency in organizing a conference to discuss social inclusion issues aiming at improvement of quality,

availability and financing of long-term care, protection of the dignity and rights of persons dependent on care, and support for an active, healthy ageing and ageing well.

As ASTRA Network goal is also advocating for policies that help young people and families we remain, however, very concerned about your Work Programme plans to review the Barcelona objectives in the field of pre-school childcare services. Our demand is that the whole of Europe works towards affordable, accessible and quality childcare for all who want it – as it help precisely those who we care most about – our children and our families. Allowing parents to be able to raise their children is by all means advisable, however, this choice should be accompanied by creation of a system that will safeguard their professional development and encourage sharing responsibilities at home. There is still a huge imbalance between men and women in the sharing of domestic and family responsibilities, leaving women – much more so than men – to opt for flexible working arrangements or even give up work altogether. Forcing out highly professional women from the labour market does not benefit neither the economy nor the family. Childcare facilities allow parents to take a job and keep it, thereby improving their quality of life and removing a major obstacle to their freedom to organize their time.

ASTRA also supports the Presidency in its effort to focus on services as a tool for preventing social exclusion and for active inclusion of the most vulnerable persons. We are however, concerned by the fact that the issue of discrimination in the labour market and access to social services were not discussed during the Informal meeting of Ministers for Employment and Social Affairs that took place in January.

We are also disappointed by the lack of human rights, tolerance or sexual education issues in the Presidency's Work Plan part on Cooperation in the Youth Field.

ASTRA welcomes the Czech Presidency effort to set out an overall framework for the provision of cross-border healthcare that will work to strengthen patients' rights and provide greater clarity on access to health services in Europe. As your Work Programme states the Czech Presidency considers this EU measure to be a benefit for patients and healthcare systems alike, especially with regard to increasing patient mobility. **We support this concept of the Programme as clarifying the rights of patients to seek health care in another EU country while being reimbursed by their national system and helping patients to exercise their rights to access cross border care. The Programme, however includes provisions of the relevant directive that are alarming from the point of view of accessibility of health services in general and reproductive health services in particular.**

In its present shape, equal access to care abroad will be compromised by the need for a patient to pay for the care first from his own pocket before being able to seek reimbursement. The risk arises that the directive in this form will create an opportunity for wealthy to opt for care abroad, while the poor's, therefore especially women's, access to the services will remain limited. We are asking you to introduce measures that will prevent such situation from occurring.

ASTRA is also aware that your Presidency will also be investigating the issue of improving cooperation between EU Member States in terms of increasing the quality of healthcare provision with the help of telemedicine and strengthening the interoperability of information systems in the healthcare sector. An important element of this approach is the E-Health system that can play a crucial role for all new EU Member Countries.

ASTRA Network truly appreciates the important role of the E-Health in making the EU healthcare a more accessible, high-quality, cost-effective, sustainable and safe service for citizens, and one in which both health professionals and citizens can increasingly benefit from. **ASTRA, however, would ask your Presidency to ensure that the new telemedicine initiatives and stakeholder involvement in e-Health is also focused on the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).**

ASTRA believes that e-Health should address the status and access to information of sexual and reproductive health in Central and Eastern Europe as one of priority issues in health strategy for coming years.

Your Excellency,

You must be aware that in a number of European Union countries, including the new Member States from Central and Eastern Europe, reproductive health remains to be inadequately addressed by state policies and programs. Limited access to contraceptive services as well as sexuality information, education and counselling often leads to undesired pregnancies and high numbers of abortions which are easily preventable if properly addressed in timely manner. Still many women are denied access to modern contraceptive methods because of financial inaccessibility. Unwanted pregnancies constitute a major public health concern everywhere but especially in these European countries where abortion is criminalized.

As the e-Health issues will be already discussed at a ministerial conference in February 2009 organized in cooperation between your Presidency and the European Commission, we will ask you to ensure that within the E-Health system an equal cross-border healthcare provision is available to all citizens and especially to women. Restricted access to safe and legal abortion is leaving many women in vulnerable situations which threaten their life and health. We see the e-Health as an opportunity to:

- provide access to safe and legal abortion services, programmes and information including financial coverage and decriminalization of pregnancy termination in countries where the law denies women's right to decide freely over their bodies as recently strongly recommended by the Council of Europe.
- allow for access of women and men to contraception at a reasonable cost and of a suitable nature for them as well as compulsory sex education for young people.

Your Excellency,

We are also alarmed by the fact that in the entire Work Programme of the Czech Presidency there is no single case of terms "women" or "gender

mainstreaming” being used or applied in any form or purpose. We remain hopeful that this will change.

ASTRA truly believes that all of the above issues will be addressed during the Czech Presidency of the European Union. We are looking forward to work with you during the next six months and beyond.

May I again express my very best congratulations and wishes of success in your work on behalf of my organisation.

On behalf of ASTRA Network

Yours sincerely,



Wanda Nowicka
ASTRA Coordinator

ASTRA members:

Albania - Albanian Family Planning Association, Armenia - Women's Rights Center, Azerbaijan - Center "Women and Modern World", Belarus - Women's Independent Democratic Movement of Belarus, Bulgaria - Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association, Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, Gender Education, Research and Technologies, Croatia - B.a.b.e. (Be Active, Be Emancipated), CESI - Center for Education and Counselling of Woman, Women's Centre for Sexuality and the Prevention, Research, and Combating of Sexual Violence - Women's Room, Georgia - Women's Center , Kazakhstan - The Legal Center for Women's Initiatives "Sana Sezim", Lithuania - Family Planning and Sexual Health Association, Latvia - Latvia's Association for Family Planning And Sexual Health, Macedonia - Sheltar Centar, Moldova - Reproductive Health Service Center, Poland Federation for Women and Family Planning, Romania - The East European Institute of Reproductive Health, AnA: Society for Feminist Analysis, Russia - Institute of State and Law, Russian Academy of Sciences, ANO "Women's Health", Novgorod Gender Center, Slovakia - Pro – choice, Ukraine - Women Health and Family Planning, Charitable SALUS Foundation, ASTRA ASSOCIATE MEMBERS: Center for Reproductive Rights, Albania, Romania, Women's Link Worldwide/Colombia.

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