



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

**Warsaw, 1 July 2009**

His Excellency  
**Fredrik Reinfeldt**  
Prime Minister of Sweden

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 hope that your term as a President will be as beneficial to all EU Member States and the rest of the world as it was during the previous Swedish Presidency, when the term was marked by a considerable impact on the EU's broader human rights agenda.

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.

This Presidency term is a unique opportunity for Sweden to lead and influence work on important EU issues. During this important time, the Swedish 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. Sweden will be asked to show responsiveness and leadership as your term will be marked by the nomination of the new President of the Commission.

Your motto: "Taking on the challenge", and choice of the key principles defined as transparency, effectiveness and dialogue underline the fact that Sweden wants to speak for the European Union in its entirety. We expect that you 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. We welcome the idea of Communications explaining the work of the EU by taking up issues that have an impact on people's day-to-day lives.

We also hope that during your Presidency you will take up the work related to the anti-discrimination directive. ASTRA Network believes that this directive will extend protection against discrimination on the grounds of age, disability and sexual orientation in a range of goods and services - including healthcare and housing - not currently covered by existing EU anti-discrimination laws. Presently in the middle of its legislative journey, the directive must win the unanimous

support of the member states - a job that will take a skilful EU skipper to complete.

One of the statements from Swedish Work Plan claims that "The Presidency wants to develop cooperation across borders to protect democratic values and the rights of individuals, and to meet the challenges facing Europe." We are aware that a large portion of your agenda is based on Presidency trio cooperation with France and the Czech Republic, and most of the matters to be dealt with by the EU in the second half of 2009 will already have opened before your Presidency.

We are concerned about this legacy especially in terms of reproductive and sexual health rights of EU citizens that were not included in the Czech and Swedish work plan. Sweden has always played a pioneering role in promoting sexual education, reproductive health care services and gender equality, and we hope that during this presidency certainly these issues will be raised and treated more carefully. We warmly welcome the statement issued recently by EU Representative to the United Nations outlining three EU priority activities in order to reduce maternal mortality: family planning, skilled assistance and emergency obstetric care. None of these addressed the issue of reproductive and sexual health rights education for all.

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 counseling 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. Restricted access to safe and legal abortion is leaving many women in vulnerable situations which threaten their life and health. The most recent alarming example is tightening of abortion regulations in Slovakia.

We welcome your postulate of strengthened gender equality and improved protection against discrimination hoping that you will also address the issue of access to reproductive rights and health of women that strongly influences women's input in economic growth and their share of labour market. Progress in the area of gender equality will contribute to a society characterized by social cohesion, high employment and sustainable economic growth.

I hope that you take all our concerns into consideration during your Presidency term.

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 organization.

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", Novogorod 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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