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# **TURKEY withdraws from European treaty protecting women against domestic violence**

By Zeynep Bilginsoy

AP News (20.03.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3skP0PN> – Turkey withdrew early Saturday from a landmark European treaty protecting women from violence that it was the first country to sign 10 years ago and that bears the name of its largest city.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's overnight decree annulling Turkey's ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a blow to women's rights advocates, who say the agreement is crucial to combating domestic violence. Hundreds of women gathered in Istanbul to protest against the move on Saturday.

The Council of Europe's Secretary General, Marija Pejčinović Burić, called the decision "devastating."

"This move is a huge setback to these efforts and all the more deplorable because it compromises the protection of women in Turkey, across Europe and beyond," she said.

The Istanbul Convention states that men and women have equal rights and obliges state authorities to take steps to prevent gender-based violence against women, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators.

Some officials from Erdogan's Islam-oriented party had advocated for a review of the agreement, arguing it is inconsistent with Turkey's conservative values by encouraging divorce and undermining the traditional family unit.

Critics also claim the treaty promotes homosexuality through the use of categories like gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. They see that as a threat to Turkish families. Hate speech has been on the rise in Turkey, including the interior minister who described LGBT people as "perverts" in a tweet. Erdogan has rejected their existence altogether.

Women's groups and their allies who have been protesting to keep the convention intact immediately called for demonstrations across the country Saturday under the slogan "Withdraw the decision, implement the treaty." They said their years-long struggle would not be erased in one night.

Rights groups say violence against and killing of women is on the rise in Turkey but the interior minister called that a "complete lie" on Saturday.

A total of 77 women have been killed since the start of the year, according to the We Will Stop Femicide Platform. Some 409 women were killed in 2020, with dozens found dead under suspicious circumstances, according to the group.

Numerous women's rights groups slammed the decision. Advocacy group Women's Coalition Turkey said the withdrawal from a human rights agreement was a first in Turkey. "It is clear that this decision will further encourage the murderers of women, harassers, rapists," their statement said.

Turkey's justice minister said the government was committed to combating violence against women.

"We continue to protect our people's honor, the family and our social fabric with determination," Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul tweeted.

Erdogan has repeatedly stressed the “holiness” of the family and called on women to have three children. His communications director, Fahrettin Altun, said the government’s motto was ‘Powerful Families, Powerful Society.’”

Many women suffer physical or sexual violence at the hands of their husbands or partners, but up-to-date official statistics are unavailable. The Istanbul Convention requires states to collect data.

Hundreds of women and allies gathered in Istanbul, wearing masks and holding banners. Their demonstration has so far been allowed but the area was surrounded by police and a coronavirus curfew is begins in the evening.

They shouted pro-LGBT slogans and called for Erdogan’s resignation. They cheered as a woman speaking through a megaphone said, “You cannot close up millions of women in their homes. You cannot erase them from the streets and the squares.”

Turkey was the first country to sign the Council of Europe’s “Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence” at a committee of ministers meeting in Istanbul in 2011. The law came into force in 2014 and Turkey’s constitution says international agreements have the force of law.

Some lawyers claimed Saturday that the treaty is still active, arguing the president cannot withdraw from it without the

approval of parliament, which ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2012.

But Erdogan gained sweeping powers with his re-election in 2018, setting in motion Turkey changing from a parliamentary system of government to an executive presidency.

The justice minister wrote on Twitter that while parliament approves treaties which the executive branch puts into effect, the executive also has the authority to withdraw from them.

Women lawmakers from Turkey's main opposition party said they will not recognize the decree and called it another "coup" on parliament, which had unanimously accepted the treaty, and a usurpation of the rights of 42 million women.

*Photo credits: AP Photo/ Emrah Gurel*

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