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## **Slovakia ditches international treaty on women's rights**

Kafkadesk (01.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2COkdmI> - Last week, the Slovak Parliament passed a resolution to force the government to drop the ratification process of the so-called Istanbul Convention – a Council of Europe treaty to protect women against domestic violence and promote gender equality.

Presented by junior coalition member Slovak National Party (SNS), the resolution was passed by 101 in favour and 28 against. SNS, a conservative and nationalist party, claimed the convention contradicts the Slovak Constitution's definition of gender.

In 2014, Slovakia passed a constitutional amendment that defined marriage as a union between a man and a women, effectively banning gay marriage (same-sex civil partnerships are not legally recognized either).

Last February, former Prime Minister and Smer chairman Robert Fico, who was forced to resign last year under the pressure of mass protests, had already announced the country would not ratify the convention, arguing the treaty "needlessly questions natural differences between men and women and calls them stereotypes".

He was referring to the controversial article 3 of the convention that defines gender as "social roles, behaviors, activities and characteristics that a particular society considers appropriate for women and men". He also stated that Slovakia would gladly adopt the measures that specifically concern the protection of women against violence.

Slovakia's Roman Catholic Church also publicly criticized the convention.

Although Slovakia signed the document in 2011, the legislative ratification process has been repeatedly postponed. Although more than 40 countries already ratified it, several EU countries, mostly from the former Eastern bloc including Hungary and the Czech Republic, haven't ratified the convention either (Poland, where the treaty came into force in 2015, is the only Central European to have done so).

You can find the full text of the Istanbul Convention [here](#).

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## **Council of Europe adopts first-ever international legal instrument to stop sexism**

CoE Press Release (28.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2OxSo6K> - States should step up their fight against sexism in all walks of life, according to a Recommendation just adopted by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers.

In response to the #MeToo and other recent movements that have heightened awareness of persistent sexism in society, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation to stop sexism, which includes the first ever internationally agreed definition of it.

The recommendation stresses that sexism is a manifestation of "historically unequal power relations" between women and men, which leads to discrimination and prevents the full advancement of women in society.

Because it is "widespread and prevalent in all sectors and all societies, and (...) sexism and sexist behaviour are rooted in and reinforce gender stereotypes," sexism is defined for the first time ever in a dedicated legal instrument to tackle it, via a comprehensive list of measures and areas where sexism occurs, from advertising and media, to employment, the justice sector, education and sport. The text in particular aims to shed light on what sexist behaviour is and proposes concrete ways for different actors to identify and address them.

It requests that member states monitor progress in implementing its guidelines and to inform the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission of measures taken and progress achieved.

The recommendation aims to address issues with which women, but also sometimes, men, are confronted with every day. Notably, it makes the link between sexism and violence against women and girls, explaining that acts of "everyday" sexism are "part of a continuum of violence that create a climate of intimidation, fear, discrimination, exclusion and insecurity which limits opportunities and freedom."

Examples of recommended action include legislative reforms that both condemn sexism and define and criminalise sexist hate speech, and provide for appropriate remedies for victims of sexist behaviour.

The recommendation calls on states to use awareness-raising measures including "speedy reactions" by public figures, in particular politicians, religious, economic and community leaders, and others in a position to shape public opinion, to condemn sexism. The recommendation also stresses that language and communication "must not consecrate the hegemony of the masculine model". It calls for the use of non-stereotypical communication to educate, raise awareness and prevent sexist behaviour. For example, it recommends ending the use of sexist expressions, and using gender-sensitive language.

The recommendation focuses, too, on recent technologies. While the internet and social media can promote free expression and gender equality, they also can allow "perpetrators" to express "abusive thoughts" and engage in abusive behaviour, the recommendation notes.

It takes into account artificial intelligence and how algorithms can "transmit and strengthen" existing gender stereotypes and therefore may contribute to the perpetuation of sexism.

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## Council of Europe: Hungary faces human rights challenges

By Craig Turp

Emerging Europe (12.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Sb5fMs> - The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović has said that Hungary faces many interconnected human rights challenges.

"The space for the work of NGOs, human rights defenders and journalists critical of the government has become very narrow and restricted," said Mrs Mijatović at the end of a five-day visit to the country.

Human rights defenders and civil society organisations have been subjected to smear campaigns and targeted legislation on foreign funding, the promotion of migration and punitive taxes, to curtail their activities.

"Taken as a whole, the legislative package reducing NGO space exercises a continuous chilling effect on the human rights work of civil society organisations and discourages them from carrying out their regular activities," the commissioner said. "The government should reverse its worrying course affecting the human rights protection system in the country, repeal the harmful legislation, and restore an enabling environment conducive to the valuable work of human rights defenders, NGOs and independent media as necessary in democratic societies."

The commissioner also noted the backsliding in women's rights and gender equality in Hungary. Only 12.6 per cent of MPs are women and Hungary has the second worst record in the 2017 Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality. "Hungary should take positive measures to improve gender equality and increase women's participation in decision-making in all sectors," added the commissioner.

Hungary has not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women although it is in the process of extending the network of support services addressing the problem. More than 28 per cent of women aged 15 or over in Hungary have experienced physical or sexual violence. "There is an urgent need to raise awareness of violence against women in Hungary. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention would be an essential step towards a comprehensive response to violence against women and girls," said Mrs Mijatović.

The commissioner also expressed concern that very few asylum seekers are able to apply for international protection, and that applications are practically always rejected due to a new inadmissibility ground introduced through legislation in June 2018.

"In Hungary, asylum seekers are unable to exercise their right to apply for refugee protection guaranteed under international and European law. The government should open access to a regular asylum procedure, lift the unjustifiable 'crisis situation due to mass migration' and stop detaining asylum seekers in the transit zones at the border. The systematic detention of asylum seekers in Hungary raises issues about due process. I also urge the Hungarian authorities to refrain from using anti-migrant rhetoric and campaigns which fan xenophobic reactions among the population," she said.

in the latest edition of the Freedom of the World report, published by Freedom House, Hungary was downgraded from 'free' to 'partly free'.

"Hungary's status declined due to sustained attacks on the country's democratic institutions by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, which has used its parliamentary super-majority to impose restrictions on or assert control over the opposition, the media, religious groups, academia, NGOs, the courts, asylum seekers, and the private sector since 2010," states the report.

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## **CoE report on Armenia recommends measures to improve women's rights**

***Recommendation measures also address the protection of disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, and establishing accountability for past human rights violations***

CoE/Commissioner for Human Rights (29.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ME5wGF> - Today the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, published [the report of her visit to Armenia](#) carried out in September 2018. The report focuses on women's rights, gender equality and domestic violence; the human rights of disadvantaged or vulnerable groups; and accountability for past human rights violations.

Finding that women in Armenia remain significantly underrepresented in public decision-making, the Commissioner urges the authorities to ensure women's full and effective participation, as well as equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of public life, equal pay and equal access to the labour market. In order to counter the persisting discriminatory gender stereotypes, Commissioner Mijatović recommends raising public awareness and promoting gender equality, especially through education.

To build on the considerable improvements to Armenia's legislation against domestic violence, the Commissioner recommends ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, while ensuring that the new national legislation is effectively applied in practice. Specifically, she urges the authorities to increase the availability of places in shelters for victims of domestic violence, and to ensure access to education for children staying in such shelters.

Another focus area of the report is the human rights of persons with disabilities, children, older persons and LGBTI people.

While welcoming the authorities' clear commitment towards de-institutionalisation of persons with disabilities, the Commissioner recommends that revised legislation governing state support to persons with disabilities ensure their inclusion in all decision-making processes that concern them. In particular, she calls on the authorities to put an end to plenary guardianship for persons with psycho-social disabilities and to move from a substituted to a supported decision-making model for all persons who may require such support.

The Commissioner encourages the government to achieve its aim to make all education fully inclusive by 2025, and recommends that special attention be paid to ensuring inclusive education at the pre-school level and to pursuing de-institutionalisation equally for children with and without disabilities. She also recommends that Armenia solidify its commitment to international standards in this area, by accepting additional provisions of the Revised European Social Charter, and by ratifying instruments allowing for individual and collective complaints. The Commissioner welcomes the recent appointment of a well-known disability rights activist as Minister for Labour and Social Affairs, and encourages

the government to take further action to raise public awareness on the rights of persons with disabilities.

Commissioner Mijatović recommends that Armenia strengthen its efforts to combat child poverty and to guarantee the right of all children to an adequate standard of living. She is particularly concerned by the placement in state care of children whose parents face socio-economic difficulties. She encourages the authorities to expand their efforts to allocate resources for parents resuming care over their children, while promoting foster care - including for children with disabilities - when this is in the child's best interest. The Commissioner also recommends that Armenia improve its legislation protecting all children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, in particular by ratifying the Council of Europe Lanzarote Convention.

To address the inadequate level of social protection of older persons in Armenia, the Commissioner recommends raising the overall level of old age pensions, increasing the availability of primary and specialised health care at the home or in the community, and tackling the shortage of medical professionals specialised in geriatric services.

The Commissioner further recommends that the authorities promptly adopt a comprehensive anti-discrimination law which should specifically include a clear reference to sexual orientation and gender identity. She calls on the authorities to take prompt and resolute action against all instances of violence, hate speech and hate crime targeting LGBTI persons in Armenia. Such incidents must be firmly condemned and investigated, and those responsible prosecuted. She also urges parliamentarians to unequivocally reject any legislative proposals that may infringe on the rights of LGBTI persons or stoke anti-LGBTI sentiments.

Lastly, Commissioner Mijatović welcomes the steps taken to finally establish the truth and prosecute those responsible for the deaths that occurred during the violent events of March 2008. At the same time, she stresses the importance of ensuring that this process is conducted in a careful manner and in strict adherence to the principles of rule of law, judicial independence, transparency and guarantees of fair trial, in order to dispel any accusations of alleged revenge politics or selective justice. She also calls on the Armenian authorities to protect the presumption of innocence of any person charged with criminal misconduct and to avoid using polarising, stigmatising or inflammatory language in their public discourse, which the Commissioner believes to be an obstacle to building a cohesive society and healing past divisions.

[Read the report here.](#)

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## The Council of Europe adopts its Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023



CoE (07.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2HgK3iX> - On 7 March 2018, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers adopted the new [Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023](#). The Strategy renews the Organisation's commitment to address current and emerging challenges and remove barriers towards achieving substantive and full gender equality both in the member States and within the organisation. The focus will be on six strategic areas: Prevent and combat gender stereotypes and sexism; Prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence; Ensure the equal access of women to justice; Achieve a balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making; Protect the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls and Achieve gender mainstreaming in all policies and measures.

**Direct Link to Full 53-Page Council of Europe 2018 Publication:**  
<https://rm.coe.int/strategy-en-2018-2023/16807b58eb>

# COUNCIL OF EUROPE GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY 2018-2023

