

MAECENATA STIFTUNG

Report on the event ‘The Right to Abortion in Germany, Poland and Russia’

19 October 2022, 16:00-17:30 CET

Guests and moderation

- [Christina Riek](#), Project Coordinator, [The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum](#)
- [Lena Henke](#) – Policy expert for sexual and reproductive rights, [Terre des Femmes](#)
- [Marta Lempart](#) - Founder of the [All-Poland Women’s Strike](#)
- Yulia Karpukhina – Coordinator for social and artistic projects, Eve’s Rib.

The event was moderated by Christina Riek and was held in English and Russian, with simultaneous translation taking place between the two languages. It aimed to raise awareness of the legal provisions for abortion in Germany, Poland and Russia, by highlighting the differences between the states and emphasising the work done by civil society activists to improve access to services. Overall, the speakers revealed that, whilst some legal reforms have been implemented in Germany, pregnancy terminations in Poland are banned almost entirely, with the procedure also coming under increasing threat in Russia in recent years. Our 2020 study, in collaboration with the [Institut für Ausländerbeziehungen](#), similarly concluded that civil society in Europe faces numerous challenges from state actors, limiting its scope for action and known as the ‘shrinking space’ phenomenon.

The *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum* is a network of independent and democratic civil society actors from the EU, Russia and Russians living in exile. It aims to support the cooperation of civil society actors and to support those based in Russia that are independent and critical of Putin. It condemns Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The event consisted of two halves. Firstly, the discussion focused on activists presenting the legal situation in their countries and the public discourse surrounding abortion, before elaborating on the activities carried out by civil society that support people seeking pregnancy terminations. To open the event, Riek commented that the topic of safe and legal abortions is “Very important but rarely openly discussed.” This is because abortion is a “taboo,” with people fearing discrimination if they reveal they had a pregnancy termination. She believed that providing information on abortion can combat social taboos and stressed how common the procedure is in Germany, with every fifth woman undergoing an abortion in their lifetime.

Lena Henke from *Terre des Femmes* opened the discussion. She provided an overview of her organisation’s work and historical and current developments in the German penal code concerning abortion. Pregnancy terminations in Germany fall under the country’s criminal code, with the public provision of information on abortion having been criminalised in §219a under National Socialism. This paragraph was abolished in 2022. Today, campaigners focus on the removal of §218 from the criminal code, whereby performing abortion is punishable for all parties, with limited exceptions. Henke noted the increasing use of telemedicine for abortion during the Covid-19 pandemic but stressed that fewer healthcare workers are providing abortions in general. This is due to doctors

going into retirement and the conscience clause that enables doctors to refuse to perform the procedure. Other topics of discussion included sidewalk harassment from religious groups outside abortion clinics and how civil society actors attempt to reframe the pro-choice debate and present abortion as necessary healthcare.

The discussion then turned to Russia. Yulia Karpukhina from *Eve's Rib* spoke about the legalisation of abortion in the Soviet Union, which was the first country in the world to do so. Restrictions were first introduced in the 1920s, with Stalin banning the procedure, except on some medical grounds, in 1936. After his death, pregnancy terminations were once again legalised, but restrictions have increased within the last decade. 2011 saw the criminalisation of abortion advertising and set a 12-week limit for procedures. Today, around 500,000 abortions are performed in Russia, a figure that has fallen by millions since Communism. A 'week of silence' waiting period, similarly to a three-day wait time in Germany, causes delays in accessing treatment. In Russia, abortion amounts to just 1% of treatments covered by public health insurance. This sparked a discussion on the provisions in Germany, with Henke stating that coverage varies, according to the state and the provider. She noted that women may choose to pay for abortion themselves, to avoid having it on record.

The second half of the discussion concentrated on civil society endeavours to promote legalisation. Karpukhina mentioned her organisation's awareness-raising efforts, which include distributing leaflets, speaking to journalists and criticising pro-life arguments. Henke's organisation calls for unrestricted access to abortion and the removal of §218 from the penal code without replacement. Terre des Femmes has produced videos of doctors legally speaking about abortion for the first time since the abolition of §219a. Henke emphasised the importance of "Networking and sharing experiences across borders" with other groups.

Lempart closed the event with an insight into abortion in Poland, wearing a green scarf to support pro-abortion campaigners in Argentina. After founding the *Polish Women's Strike* in 2016, she managed to increase public support for abortion from 37% to 69%. She acknowledged that this is partially due to organising protests, but also due to introducing civic bills in parliament. The fact that this year marks the first time that opposition parties voted yes for abortion in parliament "means that we as people are stronger than the church." Lempart argued that protests promote "mainstream knowledge" of abortion. She further noted that grassroots services face difficulty in delivering information on pregnancy terminations to newly arrived Ukrainians. She believed that political change can be mostly effectively achieved "outside of the parliament," with "civil society" as the main driver of change. Like Henke, she mentioned the importance of cross-border collaboration and of removing the ego from activism. She finished the discussion by emphasising the need to convey that abortion is an important medical procedure and that men must be involved in the conversation, but not to the detriment of women's voices.

To find out more about the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, contact Christina Riek, Project Coordinator, christina.riek@eu-russia-csf.org (please note that the organisation's website is currently under reconstruction).