



WORKING GROUP
On Reproductive Health, HIV/AIDS and Development
in the European Parliament

TO:

Mr. Stjepan Mesic, President of the Republic of Croatia

Mr. Ivo Sanader, Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia

Dr. Dragan Primorac, Minister of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia

The undersigned Members of the European Parliament, representing the Bureau of the Working Group on Reproductive Health, HIV/AIDS and Development (EPWG), are hereby writing you to express their concern regarding the potential implementation, by your Government, of a reproductive health and sexual education curriculum put forward by the GROZD Association.

The Croatian Constitution safeguards its citizens' unalienable right to health care and to a healthy life (Arts. 58, 69), provisions which are incompatible with an education programme, to be implemented in public schools, that supplies medically inaccurate and incomplete information about sexual and reproductive health and family planning, as well as about available and legal contraceptive methods. This could be extremely harmful for the Croatian youth entering the reproductive stage of their lives, and an infringement of their right to information, choice, and a healthy life.

The title itself of the Croatian 1978 "Law on Health Care Measures for the Purpose of Effectuating the Right to Free Decision on Child Bearing" suggests that unconstrained choice regarding family planning is a right and should be supported as such by the State, who should encourage and promote an informed decision. The curriculum proposed by the GROZD Association explicitly places the emphasis on values rather than facts, which contradicts, for instance, the WHO recommended strategies, which clearly promote "strengthening the use of evidencebased high-quality interventions in reproductive health", and also state that "reproductive rights imply informed choice on family planning, birth and birth spacing"¹.

The Experimental Program put forward defines sexual intercourse as being both a union driven by love and a means of procreation. For individuals to fully enjoy the former, they must be free from fear of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. In the curriculum, natural family planning methods are recommended and deemed more appropriate and safer than artificial contraception, since, it is alleged, the latter interfere with the human body and the harmony of the physical union. However, Dr. Jean Marc Olive (WHO) indicates that "the failure rate of natural family planning is much higher than other modern contraceptives. Many studies exist and the results are very similar." Mr. Olive quotes a study showing that, even if used consistently and perfectly, the failure rate is still of 12.5%, compared to modern contraceptives, which have a failure rate of less than 1%².

Moreover, natural contraception, such as the Sympto-Thermal Method, involve self-observation, temperature, external and internal mucus, and cervical observations, all recorded daily, and some methods require up to six months of research and observation (and abstinence) in order to collect baseline data. These methods are neither user- nor youth-friendly, especially as the human body suffers significant modifications during adolescence and puberty, rendering these methods unreliable. There is also research pointing to the fact that unprotected intercourse in the infertile periods of the menstrual cycle may still result in conceptions, but create unviable embryos³, and that pregnancies resulting from failure of natural contraception present an increased risk of miscarriage and birth defects⁴.

¹ <http://www.euro.who.int/reproductivehealth/areas/choice>

² http://www.unfpa.org.ph/news/opinions/lies_and_deception.asp

³ Luc Bovens (2006). "The rhythm method and embryonic death". *Journal of Medical Ethics*, pp. 355-356

⁴ Gray, RH (October 1984). "Aged gametes, adverse pregnancy outcomes and natural family planning. An epidemiologic review". *Contraception*, pp. 297-309;

Additionally, the proposed curriculum is gender-biased and features negative attitudes towards homosexuality, thus contradicting Croatian laws, which prohibit discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation, such as the Gender Equality Law, the Law on Same-Sex Unions, and the Penal Code. In its screening reports regarding your country's accession process to the EU, the European Commission specifically points out that progress in the anti-discrimination field has been limited, and "the level of protection against discrimination is still far from the EU standards". The same report congratulates Croatia on the passing on the Act on Homosexual Unions in July 2003, which governs such unions by analogy with non-marital partnerships between persons of the opposite sex⁵. However, the proposed Experimental Health Education Program contradicts this laudable legislative initiative and risks to jeopardize progress made, by implementing a curriculum encouraging stigma and discrimination.

GROZD Association suggests that responsible parenthood has to do with values and readiness for love, rather than with material circumstances. But even in the Papal *Humanae Vitae* discourse, "physical, economic, psychological and social conditions" are cited as possible reasons to avoid a pregnancy⁶.

Abstinence and faithfulness are not fail-proof mechanisms, as the proposed curriculum claims. The fact that one partner stays faithful does not imply reciprocity, thus making way for the transmission of diseases and infections, including HIV/AIDS, if proper protection is not used. Victims of sexual assaults (rape, paedophilia, incest etc) need to be informed of and have access to contraception and prevention methods. Last but not least, research conducted by the Universities of Columbia and Yale, regarding the US "purity balls", where daughters pledge abstinence before marriage to their fathers, found that 88% of pledgers end up having sex before marriage.⁷

In 2004, President Mesic reaffirmed Croatian support and commitment to "prioritize and fund" the ICPD Programme of Action, along with almost 200 influential government, development, foundation, business and religious leaders, international and youth organisations, scientists and Nobel Prize laureates. This means "to ensure universal access to reproductive health information and services, to uphold fundamental human rights including sexual and reproductive rights"⁸.

We urge you now, Mr. President, to honour this commitment, and offer the Croatian youth an open and scientifically supported sexual and reproductive health curriculum.

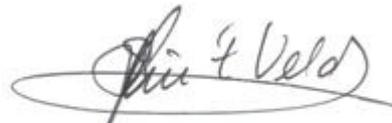
Sincerely,



Anne Van Lancker MEP, Chair of the Working Group
on Reproductive Health, HIV/AIDS and Development in the European Parliament (EPWG)



Véronique Mathieu MEP, Vice-Chair of the EPWG



Sophie In 't Veld MEP, Vice-Chair of the EPWG



Luisa Morgantini MEP, Vice-Chair of the EPWG



Lissy Gröner MEP, Vice-Chair of the EPWG



Max van den Berg MEP, Vice-Chair of the EPWG



Robert Evans MEP, Vice-Chair of the EPWG

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/croatia/key_documents_en.htm

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html

⁷ "No sex please, we're daddy's little girls", by Jocelyne Zablitz, *Agence FrancePresse*,

<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/070325/International/i508.html>

⁸ <http://www.thewif.org.uk/wif/un.php?xy=640&pl=default>