

WHEN PEOPLE
ARE IN CONTACT
WITH SOMEONE
WHO HAS
QUESTIONS
REGARDING
REPRODUCTIVE
RIGHTS, THEY
JUST TELL THEM:
CALL PATENT.

Júlia Bakó
Krisztina Les
(Patent)

**This interview was made on Monday,
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by Alexandra Ivanciu and Jolanta Nowaczyk

We always start by asking you to introduce yourself because we think it's important that you use your words to describe yourself.

I'm Júlia Bakó, I've been with Patent, not for so long, it's not even a year yet. I joined in the summer and I am in the team which is focused on Ukrainian women, mostly on their reproductive rights. But then I also work on advocacy for the organization, especially in light of the recent changes in the abortion legislation here in Hungary. I've been advocating for reproductive rights and giving a lot of interviews... and talking to a lot of organizations and media platforms that were interested in that change. I think that's it.

Hi, I'm Krisztina, I joined Patent 2 years ago. I am a social worker. I'm not part of the Ukrainian project, I'm trying to participate in Patent's efforts for advocating for reproductive rights. Besides that... Patent was founded in 2006 by lawyers, it's a legal aid organization. The main aspect of the organization is providing legal aid for victims of domestic abuse or any kind of violence against women. We have a helpline where lawyers receive calls and they provide legal aid, some of them also go to the courts with the clients, we also have this legal helpline on Messenger and email. But I think the main source is on the phone and then we also have a sexual education programme where we go to schools. We have many volunteers, together with another Hungarian organization, NANE. If we are invited, we go to schools, provide sex education or just general education on relationships, equal partnership, and so on. The other aspect is prevention, and our newest project is helping Ukrainian women. And this started in March, shortly after the war started. I think



those are the main things about Patent. We are very proud of the fact that Patent is the only organization in Hungary that deals with reproductive rights. When we had a protest in September, other organizations were saying they agree, that access to abortion is important and so on, but in general it's not really part of the public discourse - abortion or reproductive rights - so it's really cool Patent is able to do it.

For us it's interesting that there is no more discourse... because there are quite high restrictions in Hungary when it comes to abortion or reproductive rights...

I think compared to the countries from the region, like Poland for example, the restrictions are not that bad. Here you can still access abortion legally. Pregnant women have to participate in a consultation before and now with the new law, they have to listen to the fetus' heartbeat. This is a recent change. Besides this recent change, before the heartbeat law, abortion law had not changed since 1992, and as I said, compared to the neighboring countries, it's still pretty permissive. So I think this is why abortion was not really part of the public discourse in Hungary, even though for example Patent have been warning the public or bringing up issues with the actual practices connected to abortion for years now because there have been many issues and that's why we call them "sneaking restrictions". For example, it's getting more difficult to get an appointment with these consultation sessions. So people don't really discuss abortion, not even human rights organizations. Considering how things have been changing all around us, and around the world, regarding abortion, we were happy

that in Hungary it is still kind of ok. But now we are a little bit scared that they will touch the legislation, and we don't know what will happen next.

Believe us, we hate to say it... we know the reality, we know how much better it could be, we know it's awful that, for example, there is no access to medical abortion, or they are mandatory counseling... We know the reality, but at the same time, we feel we have to say: it's kind of okay, it could be worse. We need to appreciate the fact that we have this law even if, for example, in 2011 the government included in the constitution that life begins at conception and it is protected. Hungary is the only member of the EU that has this in the constitution. So it's really bad actually. This sentence could be used as an excuse to demolish the abortion law completely. So it's a huge controversy that we need to say that this law is still fine because as Juli said some neighboring countries have it much worse.

Since you already mentioned not having easy access to obligatory counseling and lack of easy access to medical abortion... does Patent provide help or advice for people who need an abortion? Or if not Patent, is there any other place where people can go and ask?

So... the counselling session is held by state nurses so there are always enough people who can do it. At the same time, we hear a lot that women are not able to get an appointment, so for example, they tell them to call on Monday. And then they just don't answer the phone. The whole week passes... so this is a way for them to make it impossible for women to get an appointment. Surgical abortion

is available until 12 weeks, so time flies. This is for example one of the things Juli mentioned as "sneaking restrictions", that on paper abortion is accessible but they know those really small sneaky ways how to make it hard to schedule appointments for counseling. And without counseling, you can't access abortion because these state nurses are the ones who can refer you to the hospital.

Just to react to the other part of your question, I think in Hungary... because surgical abortion has always been on some level available, a lot of women don't even know that there are other ways of abortion... For example by pills. As Krisztina said, the pills were not available until 2012 and it's basically illegal, or it cannot be sold in Hungary. It's also illegal to do your own abortion. So even if you go to Austria or you get pills from somewhere, for example, Women Help Women or Women On Web, and you take that abortion pill here in Hungary, this is illegal. And that is why if we as Patent want to do advocacy and spread information about pills, we would be in a very tricky situation, because first of all you cannot get them here, but through other organizations, that are not Hungarian organizations and then we would be suggesting to people something that is not legal. And that is the difference between Hungarian legislation and the Polish one. Because in Poland when you do your own abortion via the pill, that is not illegal. It's illegal to provide the pill, but if you do your own abortion, it is not illegal. Here it is. We don't know anyone who has been persecuted because of this, but... in theory that could happen.

I don't understand why you mentioned going abroad might be considered illegal?...

Actually what happens is that... as we mentioned there is this law from 1992 and it says: you cannot have an abortion but: up to 12 weeks of pregnancy, after 2 mandatory counseling meetings, in this and this hospital... so it provides all the exceptions. What they also say is that every abortion that is outside of these regulations is illegal. So they don't specify that you cannot go abroad or you can't have a medical abortion. It just says everything that is not included in this section of the law is illegal. We know from Christian Fiala, who is an abortion provider in Vienna, that weekly there are between 8 and 10 women from Hungary. We know for example that if a woman has complications after medical abortion in Vienna, there are private clinics that can help. So I know in some ways, I wouldn't call it a "black market" of course, but it's really grassroots. It's the reality. Women go abroad and get abortion pills from Women Help Women or Women On Web, they are super smart and they do it in a smart way, they don't share this information with untrusted people, and they don't share it in the hospital if they have complications, so that's why we haven't seen persecutions.

What about your legal aid helpline regarding abortion? What kind of support are you providing?

So... the helpline regarding reproductive rights and the legal helpline for violence against women is the same helpline because we experienced that a separate helpline was not used at all. Women didn't reach out. Now there is only one. There are

not many requests. Most of the time what happens is that when they are about to run out of time (out of the 12 weeks), and often it's because of a mistake of the state nurse, then they reach out and ask about their possibilities. Or... sometimes they even ask about other options like medical abortion but it's not really common. I think what we see is that women really try to keep it for themselves, so they try to solve it by themselves like ordering the pills without telling anyone. Some of the information we have is very unofficial, it's like a friendly conversation. So it's how Patent provides legal help in an unofficial way I would say.

We are not like other organizations you interviewed, not in direct contact with women who need abortions, so we are not booking their appointments, we are not buying bus or train tickets, we are not providing pills or anything like that. We are distributing information if they turn to us for information. But then the Ukrainian team is actually helping Ukrainian refugees to access abortion either in Hungary or they are traveling to Austria with them if that's required and they go through the whole procedure together if necessary.

Earlier you mentioned another organization that deals with reproductive rights. We were wondering if you could tell us if there are people organized on this topic in Hungary.

Just to clarify the organization that I mentioned, they don't deal with reproductive rights at all. It's a prevention program that we work on together - going to schools and providing sex education. But when it comes to specifically abortion, they don't deal with that. They focus on domestic violence. Please Juli correct me,

but honestly, I don't know anyone who deals with reproductive rights in Hungary.

No, I don't know... At least I think we have two organizations that consist of lawyers, specifically, and they have a lot of legal information packages. Both of them or at least one have a small information package on abortion, but that's it. They are not women's rights organizations, they are not organizations that concentrate on reproductive rights, they concentrate on all sorts of legal issues, from housing to refugee issues. So that's it, they do legal counseling and legal advocacy. I wouldn't bet my life on it but one of them has information package on abortion but that's it.¹

Also when they are in contact with someone who has questions regarding reproductive rights, they just tell them: call Patent.

One of our questions is regarding the situation of pro-choice activists in Hungary. You already mentioned there is not such a strong movement but I wonder if helping with abortion is questionable in terms of law? Is it informing about abortion on the edge already? What is considered to be "helping" in abortion?

Strongly suggesting is illegal, to motivate someone to have an abortion is illegal.

But sharing information is completely legal.

Yes.

We were wondering about morning-after pills. As far as we know you need a prescription. So how is the access concerning the morning-after pill?



¹ <https://tasz.hu/cikkek/abortusz-konnyenertheto>

As you said, you need to get a prescription to get a morning-after pill... We had a lot of complaints and really bad struggles from women who couldn't get morning-after pills because a lot of doctors refused to prescribe it... I have many friends who had really bad experiences, going from hospital to hospital, for someone to prescribe a morning-after pill for them, so it's definitely really problematic. It's really hard to get it. This is the case of abortion as well, it's different depending on the social groups: who has access to these services, like abortion or morning-after pills more easily. In the case of my friends, we are talking about young educated women and even they had difficulties getting the morning-after pill or knowing anything about abortion in general, or even about medical abortion. We are not even mentioning the huge part of women who don't have the same education, or access to the same amount of information, for example, Roma women who are facing a lot of prejudices even within the healthcare system. But to get back to the morning-after pills, we had the same ideas as Dzień Po collective. I think right now we have a small amount of morning-after pills within the organization to distribute, but we can only distribute them to friends, or friends of friends, so, of course, we can't advertise it in any way. So it's really under the radar.

What are the main obstacles that Patent is facing?

Hmm... I'm just gonna say it: resources. Patent is not receiving any funding from the government. Like nothing. We are depending on international funders and that can be a struggle between what we need and what they want us to do. So that takes a lot of our time and capacity to negotiate, to collect

some grants... I think this is an obstacle that came up recently. It's a big one right now. But then also we have a very threatening government, they can do whatever they want, whenever they want. For example with the heartbeat rule - they made this decision and we found out about it from the newspaper in the morning. Zero conversation, not even with the public, not even with experts, with no one. They just decided they can do this. And two weeks later it was already in motion. They just said: from September 15th this is going to happen and on September 15th this happened. And this is quite threatening. Because they really show us they can do whatever they want. And we always need to be one step ahead and try to figure out what they are going to do. It's a really hostile environment. The government really hates NGOs and it is bad-mouthing those organizations... I think this is happening in Poland too, they mix those ideas of LGBTQ+ rights equals pedophilia and women's rights equal LGBTQ+ rights. So they completely mix and match everything. For the public it seems to be altogether one thing, "okey, they are coming for our children, and they want everyone to have an abortion". So this is the public discourse we are working in.

Just to add a couple of things... The public discourse is not only hostile towards NGOs and civil society organizations but towards human rights organizations especially. The public discourse in general is really very sexist and the government is a huge actor in that by reinforcing a bunch of really sexist stereotypes about women. And to get back to the founders, I think the issue with receiving funds and reproductive rights is sometimes that there are funders out there who are not specifically



**RESOURCES
AND
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ARE
THE NEW SEXY**

supporting women's rights organizations but all kinds of organizations. They are very careful with the question of abortion. They are founders who would feel uncomfortable giving money for propagating abortion in any way. We have to be careful with that, we have to wrap it in a bigger project, we have to be smart in the way that we present it to the funders because some of them can feel uncomfortable that they are giving money for abortion.

What are your needs at the moment? How can people support Patent?

One of the things is project-based funding versus core funding. Big founders, as Juli said, want to see specific things, they want to fund projects that look good for them but are also useful. At the same time, Patent has over 15 members and we need core funding. Electricity needs to be paid for, it doesn't sound sexy, it doesn't sound exciting at all, but it is still a reality. So I think core funding, or just money that could be used freely on salaries, paying for office space, or phone bills.

We have a donation site set up so people can send us money directly. Sometimes we have really small campaigns for certain causes, recently we gathered more than one million forints for a summer camp for young girls. Like other civil society organizations in Hungary, we discussed briefly that we should concentrate more on crowdfunding campaigns in the future but that hasn't started. We see a lot of civil society organizations relying on crowdfunding more and more. That's something that I think we will consider in the future. There are more indirect ways to support us, like sharing our materials, and

small stuff like that. We don't really need material support like supplies... I think you know what I mean by that. We mostly need money. Even though it might sound bad, but that's the truth.

Not at all, I understand. We all understand! You mentioned there are 15 people involved in Patent, right? We would like to ask you about your structure. Do you have some core members, volunteers?...

Yes, we have a board, like the head of the board and the board members. They don't take part in the day-to-day life of the organization at all. It's a really democratic organization. We make our decisions together...

...we have smaller working groups that are working on projects. For example, we have our legal team, we have the Ukrainian team, we have a small team who handles the prevention activities that we do... So when we start a new project, small working groups will work together more closely. We have weekly meetings with all members, we try to share information about each other's work, so we know what's going on in the smaller working groups.

And the last question... Could you tell us if you are connected with any other groups, for example, international or local ones?

Patent is part of the Astra network... Also WAVE, it's a Vienna-based umbrella organization. And then... Center for Reproductive Rights, IPPF. We just started a conversation about cooperating with Women Help Women. Also Women On Web.

I'm sure we have more, it's hard to recall now... Patent is now part of InRoads.

Ah, Ciocia Czesia too! So maybe we will see each other again at some point! Thank you so much for this conversation!

Thank you!

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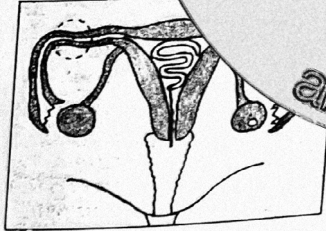
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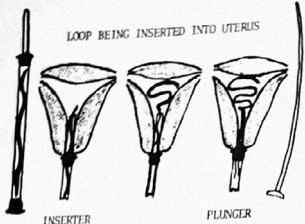
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