

Constitutive Elements of Domestic Violence: Legal Developments, Victim Protection, and the Impact on Prosecution

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Abstract: Domestic violence remains a pervasive issue, and addressing it requires a comprehensive understanding of its legal, social, and psychological elements. This article explores the constitutive elements of domestic violence, focusing on the crime's subject, the victim, the object, and both its objective and subjective sides. The study also examines significant legal developments in the field, particularly in Romania, highlighting the shift away from the principle of "reconciliation removing criminal liability" and the broader implications for prosecution. Despite these legislative advances, challenges persist, including securing victim cooperation in court, raising awareness of the legal framework, and ensuring the implementation of victim support services. A holistic approach is needed, combining legal protection with social support to help victims escape cycles of abuse and rebuild their lives. The article concludes by emphasizing the need for continued legal reform and robust victim services to protect individuals from domestic violence effectively.

Keywords: Domestic violence; legal developments; victim protection; criminal liability; legal reform

1 Introduction

In any society based on genuine democratic systems, the human being enjoys its protection through the existence of its fundamental rights. (Pasat, 2022a). A person's social being is diverse, as are the contradictions and conflicts that accompany it. It is this that determines the difficulties that arise in social relations per se and in the relationship between society and the individual, various social cells in society,

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Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) classes, social groups etc, specific people as members of society and as individuals - especially in the relationship between them (Pasat, 2022b).

ISSN: 2601-9779

Domestic violence continues to be a significant concern for societies worldwide, as evidenced by alarming statistics. A United Nations study (Global Study on Homicide. Gender-related killing of women and girls, 2019) revealed that in Romania, 20,000 women were victims of physical abuse within their homes in the previous year, and 44 of them died as a result. Moreover, 30% of Romanian women admitted experiencing physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives. This article explores the legal aspects of domestic violence in Romania, focusing on the constitutive elements of the crime as outlined in the Romanian Criminal Code, considering both the previous and newly amended legal provisions. The above findings have determined topicality investigated (Pasat, 2016b).

According to the United Nations, domestic abuse, also called "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence", can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone. Domestic abuse can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. It can occur within a range of relationships including couples who are married, living together or dating. Domestic violence affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels¹. This offense is a detrimental act (action or inaction), provided for by the criminal law, committed with guilt and punishable by criminal punishment (Pasat, 2017a).

2. Constitutive Elements of Domestic Violence

The crime of domestic violence, as per the Romanian Criminal Code, involves several key elements:

The constitutive elements of the crime of domestic violence are:

- the subject of the crime;
- the object of the crime;
- the objective side of the crime;
- the subjective side of the crime. (Pasat, 2021a).

¹ https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/what-is-domestic-abuse

2.1. The Subject of the Crime

The subject of the crime is determined in the theory of criminal law as a natural, healthy person who has reached a certain age (Pasat, 2023a). Persons who lack the signs of responsibility cannot be considered as subjects of crimes, because their actions do not reflect a conscious position, so that the punishment that would be applied to them would not be able to punish them (Boroi, 2014).

The perpetrator (subject) of domestic violence, under the old Romanian Criminal Code, was defined strictly as a family member. This term refers to individuals connected by the Family Code's general norms. However, the scope has been broadened by Law no. 217/2003¹ (Law on preventing and combating domestic violence), which now includes ex-spouses, current partners, cohabitants, and former partners in its definition of the aggressor. This widening of the circle is considered beneficial as it encompasses various forms of relationships beyond just marriage, including cohabitation and post-divorce situations, thus providing better protection to victims. In other words, only the position of family member differentiates this crime from the others, or the subject is one with a special status (theoretically speaking). (Pasat, 2021)

2.2. The victim of the Crime

The victim of the crime is understood (Pasat, 2023b) as: "the person who is criminally injured, i.e. the person who suffers or is directly affected by the material consequence or the state of danger created by the commission of the crime". (Antoniu, Mitrache & Stănoiu et al, 2006)

The victim of domestic violence is someone who suffers harm, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, as a result of abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner, family member, or other individuals within the household. The impact on victims can vary greatly depending on the severity of the violence, its duration, and the victim's personal circumstances. The victim's experience is often compounded by fear, shame, and isolation, which can make it difficult to seek help.

Types of Domestic Violence Victims:

Types of Domestic Violence Victims

Victims of domestic violence can include people from all walks of life. The crime does not discriminate based on age, gender, socioeconomic status, or cultural background. However, certain groups may face additional risks or challenges:

Women and Girls: The majority of domestic violence victims are women, particularly in heterosexual relationships. Women often experience physical abuse, sexual violence, and psychological abuse at higher rates than men, which is why

 $^{^{1}}$ Law no. 217 of May 22, 2003, regarding the prevention and combating of domestic violence, republished in the Official Monitor no. 948 of 15.10.2020

much of the focus in anti-domestic violence initiatives is on protecting women and addressing gender-based violence.

ISSN: 2601-9779

Children: Children who witness domestic violence can also be considered victims, even if they are not the direct targets of physical violence. The trauma from witnessing violence can have long-term psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, and issues with emotional regulation. Children may also be physically harmed in abusive households, especially if they try to intervene or are caught in violent outbursts.

Men and Boys: Although less frequently reported, men can also be victims of domestic violence, including physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Male victims may face additional challenges in seeking help due to social stigma, which often discourages men from acknowledging victimhood or reaching out for support.

Elderly and Disabled Individuals: Older adults or people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence, both due to physical frailty and, in many cases, dependency on their abuser. Abuse of older adults often goes unnoticed, as the victim may be isolated or unable to communicate their suffering.

LGBTQ+ Individuals: Members of the LGBTQ+ community can also be victims of domestic violence, sometimes facing unique challenges related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The abuser might use the victim's identity as a form of control, and societal stigmas or fear of discrimination can make it even harder for victims to seek help.

2.3. The Object of the Crime

The material object of domestic violence is the victim's body—specifically, their physical integrity and well-being. This means that the violence directly harms the victim physically, either through bodily injury, psychological harm, or in the most severe cases, death. Domestic violence crimes target the victim's safety and can have long-lasting physical, emotional, and psychological consequences.

The Material Object of Domestic Violence:

Physical Integrity: The primary focus is on the victim's physical body. Any act that harms, injures, or causes permanent damage to the body is considered an infringement of this integrity. This includes assaults, beatings, strangulation, or sexual violence. The severity of the harm determines the legal response and potential penalties.

Bodily Harm: Bodily harm includes a wide range of physical injuries, from minor bruises or cuts to severe, life-threatening injuries like broken bones, internal damage, or permanent disability. The Romanian Criminal Code categorizes these injuries,

and the penalty depends on the degree of harm caused. More serious injuries can result in longer sentences and more severe legal consequences.

Death: In extreme cases, domestic violence leads to homicide or aggravated murder. The victim may be killed by the aggressor as a result of physical violence or other forms of abuse. The death of the victim is considered the ultimate violation of their physical integrity, and it carries the most serious legal consequences.

While the material object of the crime is the victim's body, the psychological impact of domestic violence is just as significant, even if it's not always immediately visible. The physical harm caused by the aggressor can be compounded by emotional abuse, which often accompanies physical violence. Psychological abuse, such as constant humiliation, gaslighting, threats, and isolation, can lead to long-term emotional and mental health issues for the victim.

However, the law in many places, including Romania, focuses on physical harm and bodily injury as the primary legal response to domestic violence, which is why acts such as homicide, physical injury, and sexual assault are criminalized.

As far as the generic legal object is concerned, it is stated in the doctrine that it represents the beam determined by social and social values - identical or homogeneous, which, due to this entity or homogeneity, are protected by a group of criminal norms that are in close relations reciprocity and complement each other. (Brânza, 2005)

The Objective Side of the Crime

Under the Romanian Criminal Code, the objective side of violence in the context of domestic violence is laid out clearly through the various forms of aggression, and they are categorized based on their severity and the harm they cause. The law recognizes the seriousness of domestic violence by categorizing different criminal actions, which can include:

Homicide (Article 188): The killing of a person. In cases of domestic violence, this could be the result of an escalation in violence, where the aggressor kills the victim, and the act is treated as a serious crime.

Aggravated Murder (Article 189): When homicide occurs under certain aggravating circumstances, such as premeditation or extreme cruelty. For instance, if the murder is committed with particular brutality or if it is committed in a particularly vulnerable domestic context (e.g., in front of children), it may be classified as aggravated murder.

Physical Injury (Article 193): Inflicting bodily harm on a person. The degree of injury determines the severity of the punishment, with injuries ranging from minor (which

may be less severely punished) to severe injuries that result in permanent damage or disability, which could carry harsher penalties.

ISSN: 2601-9779

Other Forms of Violence: This could include assault, threats, or even coercion, which may not necessarily cause physical injury but still infringe on the victim's rights and safety.

In cases of bodily injury or fatal blows, the criminal code indeed allows for actions to be initiated ex officio (without the victim needing to file a formal complaint). This is significant because domestic violence often involves manipulation or intimidation that might prevent victims from reporting the abuse. By allowing ex officio prosecution, the legal system acknowledges that the state has a responsibility to intervene in situations where the victim might be unable to act due to fear, dependence, or emotional manipulation by the abuser.

Under Romanian law, there are provisions for protection orders that can be issued to prevent further abuse. These orders can remove the abuser from the home, restrict contact with the victim, and sometimes even mandate counseling or rehabilitation for the abuser.

By recognizing the objective side of violence through specific crimes like homicide, aggravated murder, and bodily injury, the law ensures that there are tangible consequences for these forms of aggression. This helps to both deter further violence and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. The fact that certain crimes can be prosecuted ex officio also reflects the state's role in protecting citizens, especially those in situations where they may be too vulnerable to seek help themselves.

Additionally, this legal framework places a spotlight on the severity of domestic violence, helping to break down the stigma and normalize the idea that this kind of violence is a serious crime with consequences that extend beyond the immediate parties involved. It recognizes the long-term impact on victims and society as a whole.

The Subjective Side of the Crime

The subjective side of the offence consists of a certain mental attitude, made up of intellectual, volitional and affective elements, which determine and accompany the physical act of execution. (Boroi, 2014)

The subjective side concerns the mental state and intent of the aggressor. Domestic violence is primarily driven by intent, whether direct or indirect. For criminal liability to apply, the aggressor must be aware that they are committing the offense against a family member or intimate partner. If the perpetrator believes the victim does not hold such status, they cannot be prosecuted under the domestic violence

provisions and would instead be prosecuted under general criminal laws addressing assaults or bodily harm.

The subjective side refers to the abuser's internal motivations, beliefs, and justifications for their violent actions. This can include:

Feelings of power and control: Many abusers see their violent behavior as a way to maintain dominance in the relationship. This can stem from insecurities, a desire to feel in control, or learned behavior from past trauma or unhealthy relationships.

Misguided beliefs: Some abusers justify their violence by thinking they are "teaching" the victim a lesson or "disciplining" them. They may believe that their actions are necessary to maintain order or keep their partner in line.

Perceived threats: Abusers often frame their violence as a reaction to perceived threats, whether it's a sense that the victim is being disloyal, disrespectful, or trying to leave the relationship. This can create a "self-justification loop" where the abuser feels that violence is necessary to maintain control or prevent loss.

Emotional manipulation: Abusers may also use gaslighting, where they make the victim question their own reality, saying things like, "You're just too sensitive," or "That never happened," to make them feel like the violence is either unimportant or the victim's fault.

2.4. Cycle of Abuse

The cycle of abuse in domestic violence shows how the objective and subjective sides interact to maintain the abusive dynamic. Here's how it often plays out:

Tension Building: This is when the abuser starts feeling frustrated, jealous, or angry—often due to real or imagined slights. These feelings may be linked to the subjective side of things: the abuser feels threatened, insecure, or disrespected by the victim.

Incident of Abuse: The objective violence occurs—this could be an outburst of anger leading to physical harm, threats, or emotional manipulation. The abuser might justify this as a necessary response to the victim's "misbehavior," in their own subjective view.

Reconciliation: After the abusive incident, the abuser may apologize, promise to change, or show remorse. The subjective side often comes into play here as the abuser may genuinely feel guilty or say things like, "I didn't mean it" or "I'll never do it again."

Calm: The tension decreases temporarily. The abuser may demonstrate kindness, making the victim believe that the abuse is over. This phase is often characterized

by manipulative behaviors like "love bombing" or excessive attention, making the victim feel they have regained the "good" relationship.

ISSN: 2601-9779

Return to Tension: Over time, the cycle repeats, and the tension starts building again, often in response to minor issues or even imagined slights. The subjective side (internal insecurities, misunderstandings, miscommunications) continues to influence the abuser's behavior.

Escalation of Violence: As the cycle continues, the objective side of the violence can escalate. What may start as verbal abuse or emotional manipulation can become physical violence over time. The abuser might rationalize the escalation by saying things like, "I only hit you because you pushed me too far," or "You made me do this." This denial and justification are key components of the subjective side of abuse.

Impact on the Victim: For the victim, the subjective side can be equally powerful. Often, victims may start to believe in the abuser's justifications, internalizing feelings of guilt, shame, or confusion. Psychological manipulation, combined with emotional abuse, can make them feel like they are at fault for the violence, especially when the abuser apologizes and promises change after each abusive episode.

Cognitive dissonance: Victims may experience cognitive dissonance, where they try to reconcile the loving partner, they experience during the "calm" phases with the abusive behavior they endure. This can make it harder for them to leave the relationship or to see the abuse for what it is.

Normalization of violence: Over time, victims might come to see the violence as part of a "normal" relationship, especially if they were raised in environments where abuse was prevalent or normalized. The subjective side of abuse can distort the victim's perception of what a healthy relationship looks like.

Breaking the Cycle: For a victim to break free from the cycle of violence, they often need to recognize both the objective side (the tangible harm being inflicted) and the subjective side (the manipulation and justifications that sustain the abuse). Therapy, support from friends and family, legal protection, and intervention from social services can help the victim understand that the violence is not justified, and they deserve a healthy, respectful relationship.

Abuser accountability is also crucial abusers need to recognize the harm they've caused, and their subjective justifications must be challenged in a way that helps them confront the underlying psychological issues (like insecurity, entitlement, or past trauma) that fuel their abusive behavior.

Thus, we conclude that the object of the offense is the values and social relations against which the act of criminal conduct is directed and which either jeopardizes

the values and social relations protected by the criminal law or injures them (Pasat, 2017c).

3. Legal Developments and the Impact on Domestic Violence Prosecution

Significant legal amendments have been made to ensure better protection for victims of domestic violence. One of the most important changes is the removal of the "reconciliation removes criminal liability" clause, which previously allowed for the termination of criminal proceedings if the victim and perpetrator reconciled.

The removal of the "reconciliation removes criminal liability" clause represents a significant and positive legal development in the fight against domestic violence in Romania. This change reflects a broader recognition that domestic violence is not just a private issue between the victim and the perpetrator, but a serious criminal act that requires state intervention, irrespective of any reconciliation between the parties involved.

Prior to the amendment, Romanian law contained a provision that allowed for the termination of criminal proceedings in cases of domestic violence if the victim and the perpetrator reconciled. While this may have been intended to respect the autonomy of individuals involved in personal conflicts, it became clear that it had serious drawbacks.

In practice, perpetrators often manipulated this clause by pressuring victims to reconcile, either by threatening further violence or offering promises of change. This practice led to a situation where many victims, under duress, withdrew their complaints, resulting in the perpetrators escaping criminal liability. This not only allowed the cycle of violence to continue but also reinforced the abuser's power over the victim.

The failure of the legal system to intervene meaningfully in these cases contributed to the continuation of the abusive cycle, as victims were left without sufficient legal protection or recourse.

The 2019 legal amendment removed the automatic termination of criminal proceedings in cases of reconciliation. This change ensures that domestic violence is treated as a criminal matter that requires investigation and prosecution, regardless of whether the victim agrees to reconcile with the abuser.

By eliminating this provision, the law has prevented abusers from using reconciliation as a tool to avoid accountability. Victims are no longer forced into a position where they must withdraw their complaint to end the legal process, which could leave them vulnerable to continued abuse.

The change is in line with broader efforts to empower victims and provide stronger legal protections. The law now reflects a greater understanding that reconciliation in the context of domestic violence can be deeply problematic—especially when it's coerced—and that the victim's safety and well-being should be prioritized.

ISSN: 2601-9779

With this amendment, prosecutors no longer face the hurdle of having to dismiss cases if the victim "forgives" the perpetrator or withdraws their complaint. Even if reconciliation occurs, the state can proceed with criminal prosecution, ensuring that justice is served independently of the victim's decisions. This can help break the cycle of abuse, as it demonstrates to perpetrators that domestic violence will not be tolerated, even if the victim decides to stay or return to the abuser.

The removal of the clause also helps address the underreporting of domestic violence, as victims may now feel that their case will be handled by the authorities, even if they are afraid to testify or reconcile with the abuser. Knowing that the legal system will take action without requiring personal involvement in the legal process can give victims the confidence to report violence.

Victims no longer face the psychological and emotional pressure to reconcile with the perpetrator in order to avoid criminal liability. This reduces the risk of revictimization and encourages more victims to seek help, knowing that the justice system can protect them even if they decide to continue living with the perpetrator.

By ensuring that perpetrators face legal consequences for their actions, the amendment reduces the likelihood that they will re-offend without facing accountability. The possibility of prosecution—even if the victim reconciles—acts as a deterrent for abusers who might otherwise believe they can avoid consequences.

This legal amendment is part of a larger effort to ensure that domestic violence is treated as a societal issue, not just a private family matter. It aligns with the principles set out in international human rights law, such as the Istanbul Convention, which Romania ratified, that emphasize the need for effective legal remedies for victims and the criminalization of domestic violence.

While the change strengthens the legal framework, it's also important that it is accompanied by support services for victims, such as shelters, counseling, and legal aid. Victims should not only feel that they have legal recourse but also have access to the support they need to escape abusive situations and rebuild their lives.

4. Conclusion

Among the first measures are legislative ones. (Pasat, 2016a) Legislation of foreign states, especially Western European states, is today a landmark of the primary importance of reforming concepts in the national legislative system. (Pasat, 2017b)

Even though "reconciliation removes criminal liability" is a significant step forward, there are still some challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that victims of domestic violence are fully protected:

- Victim Cooperation: While the legal system can now continue prosecuting cases without victim reconciliation, securing the victim's cooperation in court remains crucial. In many cases, victims may still feel pressured to withdraw their complaints, especially if they are financially or emotionally dependent on the abuser. Ensuring that victims have access to safe housing, financial independence, and support during the legal process is vital to overcoming this challenge.
- Awareness and Implementation: The success of this legal change depends on its effective implementation by law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges. Domestic violence cases often require a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of abuse, and ensuring that legal actors are properly trained to handle these cases sensitively is key.
- Comprehensive Support for Victims: Legal protection is just one part of the equation. Victims need access to comprehensive support services, including counseling, emergency shelters, financial support, and rehabilitation programs, both during and after the prosecution process. This holistic approach can help victims rebuild their lives and prevent them from returning to abusive relationships.

The removal of the "reconciliation removes criminal liability" clause marks an important shift in the legal treatment of domestic violence in Romania. It ensures that perpetrators can no longer escape responsibility through manipulation or coercion and strengthens the legal system's ability to protect victims. However, ensuring that victims receive the support they need to fully benefit from these legal protections remains an essential next step in combating domestic violence.

Domestic violence remains a serious issue in Romania, with the law evolving to offer better protection for victims. The Romanian Criminal Code addresses the subject through the key elements of crime, including the expansion of who may be considered a perpetrator, the broad range of violent actions that may constitute the crime, and the amendment of laws to prevent perpetrators from escaping liability through reconciliation. As Romania continues to refine its legal response to domestic violence, these efforts underscore the nation's commitment to the protection of its citizens from abuse, especially in the family and domestic setting. Victim support services in Romania, including shelters, legal aid, counseling, and financial

assistance, play a vital role in empowering victims to break free from abusive situations and rebuild their lives. For these reforms to be fully effective, continued investment in victim services and awareness campaigns are necessary to ensure that victims are aware of their rights and available resources.

ISSN: 2601-9779

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