



HIGH LEVEL EUROPEAN SEMINAR

PREVENTING ABORTION IN EUROPE

Legal framework and social policies

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The Institutional Dimension of Conscientious Objection

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Thank you for inviting me here. I'm very glad to be here. I will tell you the story of Macedonia. And the story of Macedonia is how to change the law terminating pregnancy, how to change an abortion law in the year 2013. So how to have many votes in the parliament and how to avoid big backlash from the society and how to try to save as many babies as possible and at the same time having the woman on board with us and not limiting the woman's, as they say, "right to choose".

So I'll tell you the background. The background in Macedonia is that the abortion started in the seven-ties. And during the late seventies and the eighties we had a huge rampant abortion rate. So, certain years in Macedonia in the eighties we had 50% or sometimes more than 50% of the pregnancies terminated by abortion. So for the children conceived, half of them were aborted, in some years half of them were actually born.

Then the nineties came, and in the 90s the abortion rates started to go down but the number of registered abortions because so many private clinics were opened, also the abortion were down it these small clinics or sometimes the abortion procedure was not registered it was just written as a different declaration and so on and so forth. So we had and we also have the problem of unregistered abortion. So back in 2008, 2009, 2010,

I got more interested in this issue, and it was a challenge how to navigate this whole issue.

And now I'll tell you how we have a project and how the whole thing has resulted in changing abortion law back in 2013 in the Parliament with the majority of votes.

When we approached the issue, the approach and the debate and the public was that we are not against the woman's right to choose but what we want to do is have the woman make an informed decision. Let's give all the possible information to the woman, empower the woman, so she can make the best decision possible. Because it's not an easy decision. It's not an easy decision if the baby's kept, it's not an easy decision if the decision is the other one.

So, also we've said we want to get a liberal approach and now what were the changes in the law?

The changes in the law were couple of them, and now I tell you the first and maybe the most important one. With the new changes back in 2013 we've said that before every abortion procedure, there needs to be an ultrasound. So the woman can hear the heartbeat of the baby, the heartbeat of the baby starts 19, 20 days after the start of the pregnancy. So, before the abortion the woman needs to have the ultra sound and why we're providing the ultrasound. We're providing the ultra sound so the woman can make an informed decision. The woman has a right to ultrasound. The woman has a right to have all possible information and then she's free to make up her mind and make the decision. But there are different procedures, but once the baby is visualized through the ultrasound once the woman hears the heartbeat, then there is a chance for a change of heart. Whether we're going to have 10%, 20%, 30% of change of decision, we'll never know, but it's a powerful tool. And it's a tool as they said, it's a right to ultrasound, it's a pro-woman it's a prochoice approach but it's an important checkpoint for informing the woman about her pregnancy but also about the life of the baby.

Then one more change in the law was added. It's between the request for terminating the pregnancy and the procedure itself unless there is a medical emergency, there needs to be at least 72 hours. There are 3 more days. So the woman can reflect more. She can speak more with her mother, partner, hus-band, best friend, whoever, she can make online research because this is an important decision. By postponing determination of the pregnancy for 3 days where the woman can as I said inform herself more, consult more, talk more, reflect more then maybe there will be a decision to keep the baby and there are researches conforming that, after more reflexion, after more thinking about, after more talk-ing, consultation, after more online research, there might be a change of heart and more babies will maybe make it to the world without blaming, without condemning, without enforcing or imposing something to anyone. So it's a liberal approach.

Also there was additional change that says there needs to be a consultation, there needs to be a consultation with the doctor, consultation with a psychologist and consultation with a social worker.

The doctor, of course, gives a medical consultation. It is a procedure that sometimes might be risky it's a medical procedure that sometimes might lead to consequences, medical and different health issues. The doctor needs to explain to the patient, needs to explain to the woman the potential risks of the termination of the pregnancy. Because there are risks. Also the consultation with the psychologist is also a private consultation where this issue is discussed because there are also ethical aspects, psychological aspects afterwards there might be a possibility there is a risk after the termination of the pregnancy there might be psychological issues or regret or different opinion. That means discussion with the psychologist in private, in a confident manner, keep the privacy of the woman but still the woman has the final word but she needs to make an informed decision, we need to give all possible information to the woman, we also need to give her the possible risks and consequences but the woman still has the final word.

Also the social worker is making a consultation, the social worker discusses the other aspects, the other elements, the surrounding of this procedure. It's an important thing and he needs to show compassion with the woman, regardless whether the pregnancy is going to continue or not. It's an important decision.

Also the social worker is in many cases offering or reminding that there is an adoption option. So if the woman is not ready or not convinced to keep that baby who is going to be born, there might be the possibility for offering that baby for adoption because there are a lot of families who want to adopt but you know the list is always long and there are some couples who are waiting for years and years. So maybe that a little baby who is going to be kept might make a family happy and that baby might find a warm home.

Also what is recommended is that the monitor is directed towards the woman so during the ultrasound, the doctor can show, you know, where is the legs, heartbeat, also it's very important, it's recommendable for the woman to have a print of the ultrasound. She can see that, she can analyse that, she has something that, and when she goes back at home, she can study herself that, she can see what is going on in her womb and she can see that a new life is developing.

A life that is unique, a life that is once in a lifetime, that is not going to be ever repeated because every person is unique. It's unique in history, it's unique in the universe, so that set of life is never ever going to be repeated. It's a very important decision. This is a decision that is going to have an effect on to be or not be for that baby. As they said this a very liberal approach. It preserves the right of the woman to choose about the pregnancy, she has the final word, so there are elements, there are both prochoice but also prolife to give a number of chances to that baby to be revealed, to see, you know,

the heart and heartbeat and to see that it's not just a couple of cells but actually it's a developing body, developing person, and that's a human being in making and coming. This was the narrative that was discussed we have not entered too much into the debate of whether the termination of pregnancy is right or wrong. We have not entered into a biological debate, or theological debate.

We had all that in our society. But the thing was to have a solid discussion and also to have an atmosphere where these changes can happen. I think this kind of approach it's a very balanced approach, it's an approach of a general consensus and you are always going to find people who are going to be in favour or against, there are people who are going to say for the changes in the law needed and people to say no it should stay as it was...

But I'm sure that with these changes, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of lives or maybe thousands were saved. Because if the woman has more time to reflect, if there is heartbeat if there is good, solid consultation, more empathy from the people surrounding, from the family or from the partner or husband. If there is more communication, then the woman can feel bigger security around herself. At the end, she's still is making the call and she's still free to choose this.

So in the year 2013, we have made these changes, I think that it gives results now that the law has been there for four years, some organisation were applauding, some organisations were criticising this. It's normal, it's democracy. There are different opinions, there are viewpoints.

Also I think that with these changes we were going in a different direction usually the changes in the laws in the last years and decades are usually going into the other direction. But as I said we were trying to find a balance and to have in mind the interest of the mother, of the baby, the wider social context, the European context and in this regard Macedonia did something that was not done for 20 to 25 years in other countries.

Macedonia is a country, maybe the only or one of the very few countries in Europe, that during the previous government, ran prolife TV ads, ran by the government. The campaign was the government campaign, it was called "choose life". There is a video and there is a broadcast on public and privacy TV station. It was suggesting, you know "choose life". It was not imposing anything. You are still free to choose and the other moto was "choose life, you have a right to choose". And that's fair. "Choose life, you have a right to choose" and still the woman is having the final word.

Why was the campaign made? The campaign was made to inform the public about these issues because as a responsible government, the government ran different kinds of

campaign. We're having, like other governments, a non-smoking campaign, a "slow down; don't drive fast; don't drink and drive; wear seat belt" campaign. And in the summer we have a campaign saying "don't throw matches, protect our forests" So we have all kinds of campaigns which are actually good and beneficial to the public. It's also good to have a campaign that is called "choose life, you have a right to choose". There are a number of videos which were broadcasted, sometimes in primetime, some of them having English subtitles. If you just go to YouTube, go to Macedonia prolife TV ad and you are going to find them, you have 4 or 3 videos.

In one of them there is a quote of Ronald Reagan, saying "I've noticed that everyone who is for abortion has already been born." So Ronald Reagan is one of the big President for the twenty century. In one of them there is a quote from Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa was born in the capital of Macedonia: Skopje. She is also having a really, really strong prolife message. And also we have in one of the TV ads the story of Beethoven, a large family and pregnancies, mother, you know the all setting. The mother of Beethoven she's still decided to keep him and to give him birth and that's how we have the Ode to Joy, that wonderful European sound.

These are some of the things that we did, we don't want to judge anyone, we don't want to condemn anyone, we want to have empathy towards everyone. And I think, we will never know the exact number of babies who were kept thanks to this but probably there are a lot of them. Because, I don't know, I think probably we can't find a situation where a woman gave birth to her baby and afterwards regretted it. And once the baby is in your hands, once the baby is born and once the baby is looking at you.

Either the mother or someone or the adopting family someone is going to love this child. Someone is going to have warm... that child is going to make someone happy. So let's give a chance to these babies, once upon a time we are all in their situation and we are also this small once. And thanks to the willingness and the warm heart of our mother and thanks to God's blessings, we were brought to this world, and we are where we are.

Thank you very much for listening and all the best, thank you