

WE NEED PEOPLE  
TO BE MORE  
VOCAL AND  
ACTIVE BECAUSE  
THEY ARE  
PUSHING MORE  
RESTRICTIONS BY  
SMALL STEPS

Adriana Mesochoritisová  
(Možnost' Vol'by)

**This interview was made on Wednesday,  
the 14th of June 2023, at 9 pm.**

**by Alexandra Ivanciu and Jolanta Nowaczyk**

## Could you please introduce yourself?

My name is Adriana Mesochoritsová, I am an activist and political scientist. I've been working on protecting human rights and women's rights, mainly on reproductive and sexual rights and gender-based violence. I am also a gender trainer. I've been working at Možnosť Volby from the very beginning, I was one of the co-founders in 2001. Right now, I am focusing on advocating and I have been the director at Možnosť Volby since 2011. Before I was working for some time in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Family where I was the author of one of the first national strategies for the elimination of gender-based violence. I am a member of the government committee for gender equality.

Možnosť Volby was founded in 2001 and it was a direct response to the law proposals and attempts to ban abortion at that time. Since then we have been actively fighting against tightening the restrictions and to make the situation better, also focusing on gender-based violence and trainings. Možnosť Volby has been a flagship for the topics of reproductive rights and it's the organization with the biggest portfolio of trainings on gender topics so it's a huge part of our activities. We have different types of trainings, usually they are long-term and their goal is to make people more sensitive to gender-related topics. We are also part of the legislative process, we are active in the process of communicating with politicians and giving consultations. So this is what we do in a nutshell.

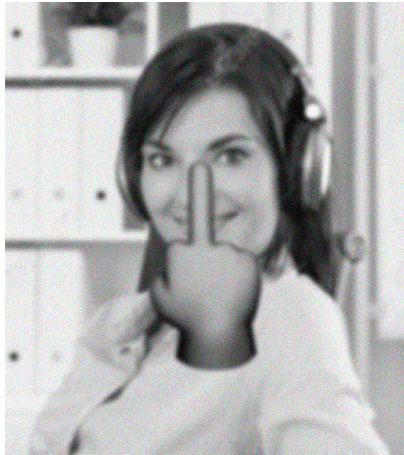
**Thank you. We would like to talk to you about abortion in Slovakia. How does the procedure**

## **work and what does the pregnant person need to go through in order to access abortion?**

In Slovakia, abortion on demand is legal until 12 weeks of pregnancy. If there is fetus malformation, abortion is possible also later. The first thing they need to do is to go to a gynecologist to confirm the pregnancy and request the abortion at their practitioner or at the clinic that provides abortion services. This is the first problem, there is no publicly accessible list of places that provide abortion. It's very difficult to get this information. From our research, we found out that the first thing they would do is to look at the pages of clinics and hospitals, but we found out that  $\frac{1}{3}$  clinics and hospitals don't have any information about abortion online and  $\frac{1}{3}$  of them have the information quite hidden, for example only in the pricelist.

Then when they look up the websites, they start calling, which is also a problem. Within our research, we did a mystery call and 16% of the hospitals didn't pick up at all. Then 12% of the facilities picked up after the 3rd time within 2 weeks. So even getting information is already a problem. After we did the research, we were the first organization who published this kind of list and we have printed leaflets but we keep asking the Ministry to become responsible for this list, to regularly update it and take care of it.

Another problem is that abortion is not accessible in some regions. There are 34% of hospitals and clinics that refuse to provide abortion on demand and with another 23% we were not able to find out because they were giving contradictory answers. Only 43% of health facilities



provide abortion on demand in Slovakia. In Slovakia there are 8 regions and some of them, especially in the East and North, are very problematic, for example in Prešov, 8 of 11 facilities don't provide abortion on demand and in Žilina which is also on the border with Poland, 4 out of 9 are not providing it. Often people who need abortions have to travel hundreds of kilometers. When they finally find the place, they have to get mandatory information about abortion which often is not based on facts and science, but rather fear-mongering.

So all of that goes against the standards for abortion according to WHO and a lot of times it's very hurtful - the kind of information but also how they treat patients.

Another problem is that for girls who are between 16 and 18 years old, there are 2 different legal regimes. One says that they need to ask for permission from their parents and the other one says that parents just need to be informed, so it is unclear. This makes things more difficult and stressful than they should be and it is against children's rights, the committee of children's rights is repeatedly asking Slovakia to remove this obstacle.

After the patient asks for an abortion, the doctor needs to inform the National Center for Health Information about the abortion and they are sending the questionnaire. Not all of the information there is health-related information, but more about the reasons of the pregnant person, why they need an abortion. So the National Center for Health Information says all the questionnaires are anonymous, however, they are using the national birth number connected with the questionnaire. We



never got a clear answer about how they are making sure that all that information is anonymous. This is also a topic for some of the restrictive law proposals, they were asking for even more information from pregnant people. So far we were able to prevent it.

After this is sent, the pregnant person needs to wait 48h. This is also putting them under a lot of stress, not only because of time restrictions, which is up to 12 weeks. Sometimes they need to undergo some medical checkups, or they fall ill... so time is really pressuring them. And 12 weeks is counted from the first day of the last menstruation so usually they are not even really pregnant for the first 3 weeks of pregnancy...

The price is also a huge factor. For marginalized and people with low income, it is a huge obstacle because the average price is 414 EUR. A lot of them need to sort out how to get the money very fast. The Ministry of Health determined the price for abortion is 248 EUR but then there are additional expenses. For comparison, the average price means 62% of the net income of an average family consisting of 2 adults and 2 children.

In Slovakia most of the people who need abortion are mothers of two. It also shows how bad family policy is.

The other obstacle is the lack of the abortion pill, there is only surgical abortion. This is one of the reasons why many women are leaving Slovakia for abortion, usually to Austria. From our research, it's 15%, but we think it's much more. They are doing it because the procedure in Slovakia is difficult to get, or there is not enough time, so they prefer to travel abroad. We know that people are ordering pills because the

procedure is so difficult and it's so hard to find professionals who don't stigmatize abortion. The big problem is the so-called conscientious objection for religious reasons, there are entire clinics or hospitals that are using the conscientious objection to refuse people. From our research, we can say that it's 1/3 of all facilities. This is also a problem with the law because the law doesn't say that hospitals need to provide abortions. It doesn't say that there must be a person who will provide abortion.

Another big issue is a lot of very restrictive law proposals. Since 2018 it's been 27 of them. Of course, it negatively affects public discourse because it creates the idea that now abortion law is too liberal and that we need to do it "better", by "better" meaning more restrictive. This is also putting pressure on the doctors because this discourse is making them think that they are doing something immoral and the number of doctors who are using the conscientious objection is growing... Also people from the anti-choice movement are protesting in front of the clinics, going there with banners, they shout at the doctors and it creates pressure on the medical health professionals. The whole environment is very restricted and this is why Slovakia scored in ATLAS<sup>1</sup> on 34 place out of 52. As Možnosť Voľby we are doing campaigns, working with the media, informing the public about the situation, about the procedures, we are not only being on the side of protecting the rights but also trying to push the changes proactively. And this is very tiring.

**We would like to ask you about your helpline and what kind of help people can expect from Možnosť Voľby when they need abortion and support?**

For a long time we were underfinanced but this year we were able to get some financial support which we used for creating a helpline. People can call and ask for information. There are people from Ukraine or from Poland, but also many institutions who are working with other people and are consulting on the topic of reproductive rights. The line is primarily working for any marginalized people. There are two groups of people who call: either a client directly or other organizations, for example for humanitarian resources or working with women experiencing gender-based violence or homelessness. So they call when their client needs a consultation. First of all, we give them all the legal information and what they should expect in Slovakia, and later we help them find a clinic. We can also call on their behalf to the clinic if it's needed and push the procedures forward and provide further assistance. Now the line works 4 days per week, but from July we will have longer hours.

**What are the most common obstacles that people are facing when they call your helpline?**

Money. And they try to get abortion pills, so we help them to get abortions in Austria.

**And do you work with someone in Austria on a regular basis?**

Yes, we have some friendly clinics there. We also help with their travel if it's needed. Or we help in case of a language barrier. Sometimes people face some complications after check-ups and then they contact us.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.epfweb.org/node/89>

**What about the morning-after pills in Slovakia?  
Are they available without a prescription?**

Yes, they are available without a prescription and they cost around 20 EUR, maybe more right now.

**And are they available in terms of information or conscious objection?**

The prices are a huge obstacle, but also pharmacists can use so-called conscious objection. I know there are regions where it's almost impossible to buy morning-after pills. There is also a huge lack of information, and there is a lot of misinformation for example about the side effects of contraception. There is a huge information barrier. There is hypocrisy from the government. When the war started, we started to push them to send packages that would include morning-after pills and they claimed it was not possible. It was probably just hypocrisy and they just didn't want to do it.

**What other collectives or NGOs do you collaborate with?**

One of our partners is the Center for Reproductive Rights, we work together for more than 10 years already. We are also part of the international network ASTRA. Besides that we work with a lot of local initiatives like with Aspekt, or together with them and Povstanie pokračuje we co-created the initiative Nebudeme Ticho (We Won't be Silent), which focuses on empowering and mobilizing people for protests. We work together with many many organizations but the closest ones are Amnesty International Slovakia, InTYMYta, Roma organizations, we also work with the

organization Odysseus, which works with people experiencing homelessness, with humanitarian organizations...

**What are your needs as an organization and how can people contribute?**

This is basically the first year we are financially sustainable, but each of the projects comes with a lot of administrative difficulties and it takes a lot of resources... As we were talking, the anti-gender movement is putting a lot of pressure and making things more difficult. This also concerns a lot of other feminist organizations. We need people to be more vocal and active because they are pushing more restrictions by small steps. People need to understand that even those small steps are a very dangerous thing and the whole anti-gender rhetoric is part of it. We need to build a civil society! Big organizations like the UN and EU who are always talking about how they want to support civil society, they need to make things easier and provide support!

**The last question is if you have any practices regarding community care and how do you prevent burnout in activist work? Can you share any of your strategies?**

To be together and to work together with other feminist organizations. Thanks to the support we have right now we are able to pay for people's therapy or this Monday we go to a self-defense class together... Also what is very strengthening and motivating is to see the people who are coming for protests, especially after a lot of work, when the streets are full, it is very energizing.

**So we chose the perfect day for our interview as today there was a huge protest in Poland after Dorota's death.**

**I am actually in Warsaw right now! I am definitely staying also for the Pride!**

**So enjoy Warsaw! Thank you so much for your time and work!**



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