Good morning to all participants,

First of all, allow me to thank two people who worked on this seminar already for more than a year. Mrs Jet Van Hoek and Mr Aycke Smook of the organisation Right to Die Europe (RTDE). When they first approached me it was clear that they were driven and enthusiastic in organising this event. We found it very important to bring this discussion to the European Parliament as **a sign of respect** to the choice of people, respect towards the people who dedicate their (professional) life to this issue and to them who undergo a lot of public pressure in Europe in 2017 when they speak out for euthanasia.

**The main message that I wanted to bring today is that we all recognise the right to life, but we have to pay the same attention to people who want to end his/her life.** We know from the research done that people are not that much afraid of dead, but well of dying. Most people want to die at home, surrounded by their loved ones.

Euthanasia is often brought by the media, as if it is a popular way to end life since Belgium allowed for it. When I look at my country, of the 100.000 people who die in Belgium, 50.000 (or half) die with medical intervention. 47.800 people died after a medical intervention that was a non-treatment decision, alleviation of pain or deep sedation until death. **Only 2,1 % of all end of life decisions is a euthanasia.**

**Why do I speak about my country?**

Well, there are **only five countries** in the world with a law on euthanasia: The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, Canada and Colombia.

These countries recognise the value of the individual, the individual who chooses to end his/her life. It is a positive stance towards its citizens. Even than, the practice of euthanasia in Belgium is the subject of worldwide criticism. A lot of cases of euthanasia enter media without the details on the medical record of the patient, often not objective and incorrect. This creates the idea that the practice of euthanasia in Belgium is based on a society that doesn’t care about the ill, and older people.

May I remind you that most cases of euthanasia are about terminal cancer patients and that the ones we see on TV are exceptions?

**Was the law on euthanasia a popular one that was voted overnight without any protest?**

Well, no. **The debate, that started in Belgium in the ’70’s** and was accelerated in 1999 by former Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, was long and heated. Many actors intervened in the debate, from the Church till the Belgian King. The law on euthanasia came into force **on September 23th, 2002.** After **more than three years of intense public debate, 44 hearings and a public debate in Parliament,** the act was finally voted in the Chamber of Representatives on May 16th, 2002 with 86 votes pro, 51 contras and 10 abstentions. That same year we had two others important acts on life ending: the act on palliative care and the act on patient rights.

Only Belgium also has a law on palliative care and one on patient rights. The law on patient rights guarantees continuous care of good quality to the patient (in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg). But also the right on full information and the right to end of treatment after being well informed on the consequences of such a decision.

**What can we conclude of the Belgian case?**

**After 15 years of experience, we can conclude that there is no such thing as a slippery slope**. The law has a strict procedure, and it is well controlled by a federal commission. Physicians are respecting the law, and there is no such a thing as ‘euthanasia physicians’ who are ‘happy’ to carry out a euthanasia.

A growing group of foreigners come to Belgium with the request to perform euthanasia (mostly terminal cancer patients). Which is a proof that the demand for a humane ending of life is vivid in the rest of Europe. The Belgian law on patient rights gives the patient an important role in this medical story. Where it is clear that euthanasia is not a right. Everyone requesting it has to check several boxes of precautionary measures. Follow the procedure stipulated by the law. On top of that: the treating physician has always the liberty to refuse the ending of life.

It is up to the physician to decide for himself, as a hospital or medical institution is not in the position to do that for him/her.

Now we notice that the law is accepted by all parties and most citizens. Proof of this is that care institutions take euthanasia on board as a humane choice of end-of-life-decisions. Even the Brothers of Charity (Broeders van Liefde) in Belgium take the demand for euthanasia on board as a humane ending of life, while this decision will probably cost them their recognition by the Pope in Rome. We do have to flag up that the discussion is still alive in society as regularly debates pop up of new cases and situations, as euthanasia on minors, mental diseased and so on.

Before ending my intervention I want to bring you **one personal anecdote** of a young girl in my hometown that, after many requests to end her life, finally obtained the ok of her treating physicians. **....**

I hope that the discussion today with all of you will convince some people in Europe that “the right to die” and euthanasia or not diabolic issues, but topics that deserve respect. Respect towards the person that asks these questions. It is the intentional termination of one’s life by someone other than the person concerned, at the explicit request of the latter.

**A dignified end of life is a human right. We should guarantee this over the whole of Europe.** We should foster the discussion on it. Therefore, we, as politicians, need your help. This is also the title of this seminar and I hope we will find some ways to further this case.

**To all my colleagues, I invite you to sign, after this seminar, the “Charter on a dignified end of life, as a human right.” It is a symbolic gesture, but so important, to show our respect to our citizens.**

I wish you all a fruitful debate and thank you for your presence.

Hilde Vautmans

Member of European Parliament

12.10.2017