

On Monday April 20, 2009 Josh Tolbert-Smith and I conducted a conversation over Skype with Veronika Kamenikova, a student of law from the Czech Republic. Our topics of discussion included Avian flu, the recent earthquake in Italy, climate concerns in the Czech Republic and Illinois, and some interesting information about our outlook on life and the legal system both domestically and internationally.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Josh Tolbert-Smith is a 26 year-old senior at the John Marshall Law School in Chicago, Illinois. He currently works for a criminal defense attorney named Marc Martin. He plans on being a transactional lawyer after he finishes law school. Josh explained that his enrollment in the Public Health Emergency Law course was prompted by his interest in the variety and relevance of the topics covered in the course. This was his first time using Skype.

Veronika Kamenikova is a 24 year-old and in her 3rd year of a 5 year Law degree at Masaryk, University in Brno, Czech Republic. Her University program started immediately after high school. She does not currently work, but formally worked with her mother at an accounting firm. She does not know what she wants to do after she completes her education at Masaryk, but she says that she “does not know whether she wants to be a lawyer.” Veronika is originally from Prague. She commented that there are a lot of American tourists that visit the Czech Republic and her roommate is from Mexico. She has traveled to the United States on several occasions, but mostly to vacation destinations in Florida. Veronika enrolled in the current course because the topics were interesting and it was one of only a few courses offered in English. Veronika does not like using Skype.

I am a 27 year-old 2nd year student at the John Marshall Law School in Chicago, Illinois. I currently work for the same criminal defense attorney as Josh above. As for my future career plans, I

am still torn between several law “specialties,” as I have found many areas of law that peak my interest. Those at the top of my list include - National Security and disaster preparedness issues, which lead to my enrollment in Public Health Emergency Law course this semester. This was my first time using Skype to make a call.

AVIAN FLU AND PREPAREDNESS

Our first topic was a discussion of a potential Avian Flu outbreak both in Illinois and the Czech Republic. I explained the process of our federal system and the executive role held by our state governor. He is the person with vested authority to declare a public health emergency in the state of Illinois. We discussed the role of the Department of Health and the Illinois Emergency Management Agency in the preparedness and containment of any potential outbreak of avian flu.

Veronika explained that the President of the Czech Republic is the head of the legal system and that the Director of the Ministry of Health would be in charge of any response to a public health emergency. Veronika explained that she has never known anybody that has been affected by the avian flu in her circle of friends or family.

I commented that I thought it would be devastating if there was ever an outbreak in a highly populated metropolis like Chicago. For example, if the H5N1 virus or something similar was to be widely spread it would produce a mortality rate of 50% in those infected. I said that containment would be difficult in a city like Chicago.

Veronika said that she does not believe that the avian flu is much of a threat in the developed world, but rather a mere media scare tactic. She knows that there have been deaths around the world from this condition, but believes that it is so rare that it cannot be a tangible threat.

I explained that what is worrisome is the degree of power the government has in the wake of an emergency. I believe that government having absolute power is troubling and unchecked power is

never good. In the event of an outbreak, the government could force citizens to be vaccinated against their will, risking jail time for those that are noncompliant.

Veronika explained that she thinks that citizens only get the information that the government chooses to give them. She believes that intelligence is limited to people in the highest echelons of society. She thinks that there is little agreement in the EU on how to handle outbreaks or other emergencies in the EU and that the citizens don't really believe what authorities are actually saying to them.

PERSONAL VIEWS ON AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN RELATIONS

Veronika told us that she believes that many Americans are egocentric and that over the last 8 years our last president brought that belief to the top of the European psyche. She thinks that it is good that President Obama is attempting to mend relations between the USA and Europe. She is hopeful that the US/EU relationship will be better in the future.

We talked briefly about the missile defense shield that is being proposed by the USA to be installed in the Czech Republic and Poland. Veronika explained that due to Russia's former influence on the Czech Republic, it is beneficial for Czechs to be aligned with the United States. She also explained that the Czech people do not like change and are very closed minded. These qualities account for the resistance they have for the missile defense system. There is a lot of uncertainty in the country at this time because the government just collapsed. Veronika also commented on the prevalence of ethnic political tensions due to the division between those of Russian decent that support Russian policy and those of non-Russian decent that support US policy.

EARTHQUAKE IN ITALY

We then discussed the earthquake that happened in L'Aquila, a town just a few hours east of Rome. Veronika suggested that the age of European towns, the lack of retrofitting, and in this case, the location on the fault line lead to this being a terrible disaster. She explained that a seismologist warned

people about an impending earthquake just a few weeks before the actual event. The sharp rise in radon gas in the earth's crust around the region was a clear indicator that an earthquake was imminent. The scientist tried to warn the public by driving through town with loudspeaker messages about seeking shelter and evacuating the area. He was arrested by authorities and faced potential prosecution for inciting public unrest. This shifted our discussion to who to trust before, during, or after a disaster. The story above illustrates the complexity of this question. If nobody believed a seismologist about a possible earthquake, then who would we believe? I think it's better to be informed and prepared for the worst, than ignorant and hoping for the best.

CLIMATE CONCERNS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND ILLINOIS

We then moved on to climate troubles. I explained that Chicagoans face excessively hot summers and equally cold winters. In addition to these climate extremes, we also live in tornado alley. Thus, Mother Nature consistently gives us our fair share of strong thunderstorms, hail, and tornados that devastate whole towns and cities.

Veronika told us that the Bavarian region, southeast of her current hometown of Brno, consistently experiences flooding. In fact, in 2006 a whole city was destroyed in flooding that affected a large portion of Europe.

CONCLUSION

I think that we had a very fruitful conversation regarding the similarities and differences between our educations, countries, and personal beliefs. We were able to discuss important Public Health issues dealing with Avian flu, disaster preparedness, the missile shield, and climate concerns. I found our views on the role of media and the government in health law policy to be the most contrasting. According to our conversation, it seems that we in the US place much more emphasis on national security threats and public health problems than our European counterparts. But this may entirely depend on which American and which European you are speaking with. It was an amazing

experience discussing these relevant topics with a colleague from across the pond, and I hope to stay in touch with my Czech friend to discuss world issues and maybe even visit her if I am ever in the Czech Republic in the near future.