

FMA STUDY VISIT TO SERBIA

SERBIA REVISITED: THE LUCKY DIP APPROACH TO HISTORY

If there is one constant theme in Serbian history, and thus in the Serbs' historical image of themselves, it is this: Serbia is the heartland of the Balkans. It has the most glorious past, put up the most frequent resistance to the Turks, was the most cruelly punished, but, in 1879, was the first to gain its independence. It seemed as if the country was guaranteed the right to play a leading role in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was created after the First World War. Serbia's dominance was met with fury and opposition, particularly from Croats and Slovenes, to which King Alexander responded by declaring a royal dictatorship. In 1934, on the orders of Croatian fascists, he was assassinated. When the regent, Paul, reached a possible agreement between Croats and Serbs to establish a democratic country, the Second World War broke out and occupying forces made mincemeat of such aspirations. In 1945, Tito established his national communist dictatorship, he being the only statesman to appreciate that a multiethnic state could survive only if a careful balance was struck between the desires and interests of all its people. Until his death in 1980, he experimented, manipulated, punished and rewarded, in

a constant effort to preserve that equilibrium, but without acknowledging the Serbs' natural leadership role.

It was only seven years later that the sense of resentment was released when the new Serbian party leader Milošević took advantage of it. Riding on the waves of Serb nationalism, he overthrew party leaders who thought differently in Vojvodina, Montenegro and Kosovo, secured a majority within the Central Committee and ultimately became leader of the State. His claims had triumphed over those of the Croats and Slovenes who seceded, promptly followed by the Bosnians, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Kosovars. The old federation was definitively wrecked by the radicalised warfare of the 1990s. Thus the 20th century ended as it had begun: with war in and over the Balkans.

"Balkanisation" has become a concept which stands for centuries-old feuds over historical rights, ethnic cleansing, vendettas, fragmentation and religious intransigence. The Balkans were bypassed by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Humanism, tolerance, reason, individualisation and mutual respect never gained sufficient ground in that part of Europe where one

trauma seems to succeed another. What do the Balkan countries have in common? In the past century and half, they have never decided their own fate. The decisions that mattered have been taken for them in Berlin, London, St Petersburg, Paris, Vienna and Istanbul. They can also be said to have a common heritage, because there is something which failed in all those new countries alike, despite having succeeded elsewhere: the democratic experiment. It was only in 1989 and 1991 that the concept of democracy was encountered for the first time for practical purposes.

The history of the Southern Slavs used to be a lucky dip, which could be a source of unlimited embellished glory as well as allowing people to claim for themselves heroic courage in order to demonise treacherous neighbours. This resulted in melodramatic nationalism, which isolated people and kept hate figures potent. Since then the tide has turned. However, once again it is a "great power", the European Union, that seems destined to determine the future of this turbulent region where Celts, Greeks, Romans, Huns, Turks, Ottomans, Habsburgs and Nazis have all had their day. A shared future for independent Balkan republics under the aegis of the EU ought to make "balkanisation" a more positive term than indicated above. An authoritative Dutch monolingual dictionary still defines it like this: "creation of uncertainty, disorder and terror in a country".

Jan-Willem Bertens

ELDR, Netherlands (1988-1999)
bertens@hetnet.nl



Prince Mihailo Monument in Belgrade ©IStock: nedomacki

COMING IN AND GOING OUT

It was a strange experience joining the Former Members Study visit to Serbia. Travelling from the UK, now preparing to leave the EU in 2019, to Serbia whose Government is deeply involved in accession negotiations, was not a journey I had ever imagined.

Our meetings with Government were positive. Serbia, though still with high unemployment, has been improving its GDP. Differences among ethnic and religious minority groups are handled imaginatively by means of national representative councils. A big stumbling block is relations with Kosovo which is not yet recognised as an independent country by all EU member states.. Relations with Russia also cause tensions.

The most hopeful sign is that current financial support to Serbia from the EU, will, over the years, boost economic growth, bring down unemployment and ease these tensions

It was encouraging to note the agricultural potential but economic growth would also be strengthened by an increased investment in R&D,



Anna Karamanou and Gisela Kallenbach during the visit

which is below EU average, and the construction of the projected gas pipeline to Bulgaria which would cheapen energy supplies.

Meetings with NGOs tended to be more critical of Government though business groups were enthusiastic and actively pursuing the opportunities that they believed EU membership would bring. The powers of the Prime Minister were questioned by some and dissatisfaction

expressed at the low level of independence of the judiciary. Back home I learned that the small coastal port of Amble, 20km north of where I live, was to have a £55 million housing development. When first elected to the EP the town was suffering from the loss of its coal trade and most of its fishing. The coal mines were closing. I supported the local council in its application for Regional Funding towards the building of a marina. It has proved to be a catalyst for the recovery of the local community. Not always a smooth journey but time, effort and patience can work wonders. It is a lesson to which the EU member countries must hold fast in the turbulent political times that lie ahead.



Meeting with the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee for European Integration

Gordon Adam

PES, United Kingdom (1979-2004)
gordonjadam@aol.com

SERBIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

Serbia wants to join the EU in 2020. There are still some obstacles to be overcome, however. The biggest challenge is to improve relations with three of its nearest neighbours: Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Bitter disagreements need to be resolved with all three countries. They stem from cultural claims, ethnic divides, shifting borders and territorial disputes - a centuries-old legacy. They have fostered a mutual distrust that can quickly escalate into open hostility. These disagreements are detrimental to trade and to the development of each of the countries involved.

Croatia and Serbia have never allowed the wounds they inflicted on one another in the Second World War to heal. On both sides of the border, the governments constantly rehearse the most painful stories from that period. The war that started in 1991 deepened the resentment between them. The massacre of Croats at Vukovar and the expulsion of Serbs from Krajina stirred up old animosities. During our trip, the press in Belgrade vociferously denounced alleged plans for a genocide being hatched by the Croatian Government.

In Bosnia, it is the treatment of the Serb minority which is souring relations between the two neighbours. The major powers thought that a decentralised power structure and mutual decision-making would end tensions between Bosnian Muslims and "Greater Serbia" nationalists; they were wrong. Although the civil war which ended in 1995 has not flared up again, the two communities are more estranged



than ever. In a recent referendum, an overwhelming majority of Bosnian Serbs demonstrated their desire for reunification with the mother country. Kosovo poses an even greater problem. The Serb minority living in the north of the country acts as if Kosovo did not exist as a state and the Serbian Government has made it clear that it has no intention of recognising the authorities in Pristina. Using carrot-and-stick tactics, the EU recently managed to organise a meeting between the two prime ministers. All that came out of it, however, were low-level technical agreements and empty words. This tense situation is seriously hampering economic development across the region. Kosovo has no outlets for its goods and is becoming poorer and poorer. Bosnia is hopelessly mired in poverty. Croatia is in a slightly better situation, given that it is an EU Member State, but unemployment has risen and wages are low. In Serbia, the lack of job prospects is prompting many young people to turn their backs

on the country.

It would be wrong for the European Union to continue treating these four states - which are vulnerable and corrupt to differing degrees - as individual cases. A joint approach is required because their fates are interlinked. If only Brussels would grasp this! If only it would act swiftly! In every one of these republics, the economic, social and political situation is worsening and extremists are gaining ground. Nothing good will come of this, either for the region or for Europe as a whole. In my opinion, this is the main lesson to be learnt from our trip to Serbia.

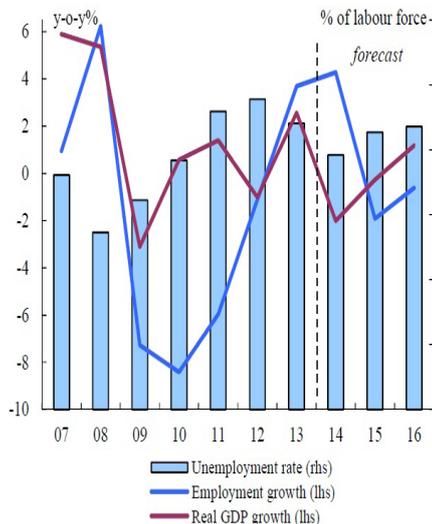
Michel Pinton
NI, France (1979-2004)
m.pinton@wanadoo.fr

SERBIA AND ITS ECONOMIC SITUATION

After signing an association agreement in 2008, Serbia became a candidate for EU accession in 2012; is it prepared for membership? Serbia, which lies on the edge of the Pannonian Plain and contains a part of the Dinaric Alps, has throughout history been associated with Hungary and Bulgaria. It was ruled by the Turks for around 500 years, and is now one of the poorer Habsburg successor states behind Croatia and Romania.

Per capita income is low at USD 12 450 p.a. (average wages of EUR 300 per month), with very low productivity in agriculture, which accounts for just 8% of overall added value (gross domestic product). Of its 7.1 million inhabitants, with many large families, 1 million people are employed in the informal economy and unemployment is rife.

Foreign direct investment fell in 2015, perhaps as a result of persistent political risks, despite the judicial system's harmonisation with EU law. Not only is there instability in the wake of the wars with Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo and the NATO



4th meeting of EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC) in 2015 © European Union

bombardment during Milosevic's time, there is also dissatisfaction and increasing disappointment that Kosovo's declaration of independence has been internationally recognised by most UN member countries. Many Serbs hope that relations with Moscow (free trade agreement) could see the return of Kosovo to their country as a result of pressure from the Kremlin. The Russians are skilfully turning Serbia's friendship to their advantage, with growing propaganda, to acquire, for example, its refineries at a knock-down price.

Not enough of the economy has perhaps been privatised in comparison with other transition economies, although many foreign banks already operate in the country. While inflation remains low (low labour costs), financial stability remains still some way off, with a rising budget deficit and debt. The EU has so far provided support to the tune of EUR 3.3 billion in pre-accession aid.

While the direct investment in the country of EUR 3.1 billion benefits

78 projects, regional cooperations between the cities we former parliamentarians visited (Novi Sad (Vojvodina) and Nis) and Baden-Württemberg and Hesse appeared to be working very well, as did those with China.

Both of these cities, one in the north, the other in the south, are university towns that train a great many engineers. There are also IT hubs that provide incentives for many SMEs, with 2000 engineers employed in Novi Sad alone.

Serbia, with its strategic position between Turkey and the EU and with various free trade zones, is a sought-after potential investment partner, especially via the EU's SME network. We hope that its progress towards greater stability continues.

Ursula Braun-Moser

Germany,
EPP (1984-1989),
EPP-ED (1990 - 1994)
braunmoser@aol.com

EARLY EU MEMBERSHIP OF SERBIA NOT GUARANTEED

Since 2014 Serbia is an applicant country for EU membership. The official position of the Serbian Government towards EU membership remains positive. Nevertheless, a number of important barriers for membership have to be overcome. We may hope that this will be the case. Serbia, as a potentially leading country in the Balkans, could be a stabilizing factor in a region of Europe which has for such a long period been a powder keg of nationalist outbursts. Economically, although slowly, Serbia makes progress. On the other hand, at least three political stumbling blocks remain. In the first place little or no progress has been made in relation to the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. It is worrying that the political dialogue between Serbia and the Government of Kosovo, promised in the earlier Brussels agreement of 2013, has stalled. In particular the talks concerning special powers for the Serb minority have remained at a standstill. Another problem is the growing tendency in the region to consider the EU as not very serious about

its integration and accession policy. Russia, with its long historic links with the Balkan countries, is inserting itself into this new power vacuum in the region. Russia uses its soft power to increase its influence in the Balkans and win hearts and minds. Serbia is no exception. Over the years Russia has scored with Serbia e.g. by vetoing a UN resolution condemning the Srebrenica massacre as genocide. Russia supports Serbia in its policy relating to Kosovo. Serbia, on its part does not support the current Western sanctions against Russia. As a result Serbia is engaged in a difficult balancing act between its EU objective of membership and a positive attitude towards Russia. There is a trend to present its role as a bridge between the EU and Russia, as if they can be seen as being on the same footing. But at the end of the day such a vision cannot be maintained. If only in economic terms trade relations and direct investment between the EU and Serbia constitute more than 70 per cent of overall Serbian trade. On the other hand the trade and overall economic relations with Russia are very modest.

Traditional Serbian and Russian links can of course be maintained, but at the same time the EU values of democracy and the Rule of Law should be accepted by the Serbian Government. After all Serbia has committed itself to gradually associate itself to the Common Security and Foreign Policy including the non-recognition of Crimea occupation by Russia. Finally, on the internal front, freedom of expression is one of the values on which the EU is founded and promotion of these values is fundamental to assess a country's aspirations to become an EU member. In this respect, according to the 2016 World Press Freedom Index, the development of a free media in the Western Balkan region has either come to a halt or is in reverse. Unfortunately this is also the case in Serbia. In particular the delays in implementing new media laws, guaranteeing a better protection of the independence of journalists, are worrying. Freedom of expression and press freedom, an independent judiciary and full parliamentary control of governmental actions are essential ingredients of a European culture. In conclusion: Serbia has come a long way from its turbulent past of the last century. Clearly the Serbian government recognizes that there is no alternative for the way forward. But at the same time there is still a considerable way to go.



Official visit of the President of the European Parliament to the Western Balkans. President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz addresses the Serbian parliament in Belgrade, Serbia on Wednesday, July 15, 2015. © European Union

Laurens Jan Brinkhorst
ELDR, Netherlands (1994-1999)
l.j.brinkhorst@gmail.com

WOMEN'S RIGHTS & GENDER EQUALITY IN SERBIA

Ms Aleksandra Lekic, head of Trade Unions Confederation, at the meeting with our FMA delegation, was clear: "There is not a single safe job in Serbia. There is extensive discrimination and bias against women in the labour market, unstable jobs, work without contracts, more flexibility, less security, dismissal of pregnant women and women on maternity leave, as well as sexual harassment and inequality in promotion and salaries. Official unemployment is at 13-15%, however, in reality it is much higher. Women's unemployment is higher than men's, while youth unemployment has reached skyrocket".

In fact, Serbia, is at a crucial stage in its political and socioeconomic development. After a phase of economic growth, of poverty reduction and increase in living standards, the country was affected by the 2008 global economic crisis. Gender Equality policy is guided by the principles declared by the key international frameworks, as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the UN Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women,

as well as the EU New Framework for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, in line with the process of Serbia's accession to EU (particularly chapters 19 and 23). Concerning the area of equal treatment, labour legislation has yet to be fully implemented. The employment rate of women (38.3%) is significantly lower than the EU-27 (58,5%). Women still do not participate to the same degree as men in the labour market. However, the rate of women on boards lies at 16% and is higher than the EU-average (14%). At the same time, the rate of women in national government is very low with 11% (EU average 26%). Women are underrepresented in executive and legislative power, at central and regional level.

Serbia has taken steps to strengthen the protection of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons. Effort is also dedicated to the promotion of economic participation of women from vulnerable groups, including rural women, roma women, women older than 60 years old, victims of violence and women from ethnic minority groups.

Particular concerns are expressed in regard to violence against women, noting that the number of women killed by their partners has increased, the number of shelters is insufficient and there is no national women's helpline. It is evident that legislation and mechanisms for the protection of women against all forms of violence need to be strengthened. As stated by the sociologist professor Marina Blagojevic-Hughson, we met in Novi Sad, "Catching up" creates specific gender regimes, highly dependent on women's resources in both the private and public domains, which generally improve women's individual and collective bargaining position. However, strong patriarchal and misogynous ideologies serve to counterbalance women's gains, enable continuous high exploitation of their resources, and domesticate and pacify women successfully". Ms Blagojevic also said that the private sphere in Serbia, is built around family and kinship networks still largely compensate for the lack of institutional state support for families. This means that the often extended family is playing an important role as a "survival unit". I would add that the gender regime in Serbia keeps many characteristics from the legacy of five centuries of Ottoman occupation, which ended on 1878. Women in all Balkan counties still struggle to catch up and get rid of the anachronistic Balkan/patriarchal culture, which opposes modernization and gender justice. EU shows the way!

Anna Karamanou
PES, Grece (1997-2004)
anna@karamanou.gr



Meeting with Trade Unions

FOLLOWING IN THE STEPS OF CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

Serbia, a place where roads and civilisations meet, a country full of contrasts where nature and history play a fundamental role, has always been the scene of age-old conflicts, with wars, fires and destruction which have left their mark but have strengthened the country's historic and cultural identity.

It used to be one of the most important European centres of the prehistoric world.

The famous Roman emperor Constantine the Great, who in 313 issued the Edict of Milan on religious tolerance and in 330 founded Constantinople, was born in 274 A.D. in Niš, administrative centre of the Nišava District, located at the crossroads of Balkan and European highways connecting Asia Minor to Europe, in the southern part of Serbia.

Niš suffered, in different eras, invasions by the Goths, Bulgarians, Hungarians; once it had been re-conquered by the Serbs, the city was then taken by the Ottoman Turks in 1375, as evidenced by the large fortress built in 1719/1730 on the foundations of the Roman, Byzantine and medieval fort. The 'Tower of skulls' (ćele kula), a tower that currently incorporates 58 skulls of 'rebel' Serbs (initially it had 952) is impressive. It was built by the Turks as a warning after the Cegar victory of 1809 and the Serbs keep it to show the price paid by their fathers for independence.

The archaeological site 'Mediana', one of the most ancient Christian monuments, is extraordinarily beautiful: it was the sumptuous residence of the Roman emperors – 40 hectares decorated with frescoes

and mosaics, built between the 3rd and 4th centuries by the river and hot springs, abundant in gardens, flower beds, courtyards, sculptures, columns, fountains, pools and baths, with an amazing irrigation system. Today, Niš is a centre of academic excellence with some 30 000 students, 12 faculties and innovative research laboratories. It is one of the key industrial centres of the country in the electronics, automotive, mechanical engineering, textiles and tobacco sectors. Third largest city in Serbia, with around 300 000 inhabitants, it hosts numerous cultural and sports events and is rich in mineral and thermal springs. Mayor Darko Bulatović and the Chair of the City Council Rade Rajković warmly welcomed our delegation, stressing the importance of developing international relations and presenting a local economic development programme consisting of projects aimed at attracting foreign investors, who would be required to employ local staff in order to reduce unemployment. The strategic investment plan is based on the development of infrastructure, both the road network and airports,

and the strengthening of the CEFTA free trade agreement and agreements with European countries. Serbia focuses greatly on showcasing its cultural heritage, as shown by the candidacy of Novi Sad for European Capital of Culture 2021. Novi Sad, on the north bank of the Danube, is the capital of the Vojvodina Region and a well-known industrial, academic and cultural centre which is famous for the 'EXIT' music festival and boasts numerous museums and galleries rich in works of art and archaeological exhibits. Serbia is determined to join the European Union and is carefully examining the chapters of the Accession Treaty, particularly with regard to justice and human rights, but has no intention of recognising the independence of Kosovo and wishes to maintain its centuries-old alliance with Russia, owing both to its Slavic identity and Orthodox Christian religion and to the economic, political, military and cultural agreements that have opened up significant trade channels, especially in the infrastructure and energy sectors.

I personally believe that the accession of Serbia to the EU is important in the interest of balance in the Balkan area and to complete the European project from a historical and cultural point of view.



The FMA Delegation with the Municipal President Rade Rajković in Niš

Monica Baldi
EPP-DE, Italy,(1994-1999)
baldi.monica@email.it

VOIVODINA AND ITS PEOPLE: “UNITED IN DIVERSITY”

Outside the restaurant where we are dining in the woods on the edge of Novi Sad, the waters of the Danube glisten in the early autumn sunshine. A few boats are out on the water, and on the other side we can make out, on the verdant hills, the red roofs of scattered houses and a church with an attractive onion tower typical of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. This afternoon, on the broad, café-lined, pedestrian streets of the capital of Voivodina, in this charming and peaceful landscape, we have the impression that life is good.

And yet this autonomous province of northern Serbia, one of the most ethnically diverse regions of Europe, has – in theory – all the hallmarks of a place likely to be troubled by communal strife, in a region where such strife has raged and still gives rise to fierce ethnic tensions. Protected by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, at the end of the 17th century Voivodina was a refuge for groups of Serbs who were subject to attacks and oppression by the Ottoman Empire; its broad, highly fertile plains and its river port of

Novi Sad on the Danube attracted colonists and merchants from all corners of the Habsburg Empire. Thus Voivodina became a veritable melting-pot, boasting of being home to 22 or 23 different “nationalities” or ethnicities, speaking some 15 languages and practising various religions... and living in peace... Our hosts during our visit to Novi Sad, members of the Provincial Assembly or the Provincial Executive, are particularly proud of it; they were keen to show off to us the democratic model that has been put in place to preserve these cultural and linguistic identities. Anyone who declares, on a voluntary basis, that they belong to one or other minority, is allowed to participate – in addition to their vote as Serbian nationals in regional and national elections – in the elections to that minority’s “National Council”, which is consulted on all questions relating to culture, education and language use. The province also has five official languages which appear on public buildings: Serbian, spoken by some 75% of the



Jan-Willem Bertens, Leader of the FMA Delegation with Igor Mirovic, President of the Government of Voivodina

population (1.3 million people), Hungarian by around 300 000, Slovak by 50 000, and Romanian and Ruthenian by a few tens of thousands each. Our hosts stressed that the minorities “National Councils” are being consulted in connection with the negotiations for EU accession, in particular the recently opened Chapter 23 on fundamental rights. They told us with a smile that Voivodina could be a model for Europe, with its pluralist concept of citizenship and its layers of belonging: to a state, a region and a culture.

We stayed too short a time in Voivodina to look more closely at the reality of living in this pluralist society. At a time when, in response to the upheavals of globalisation, questions and tensions about identity are proliferating everywhere in our European countries, it would be worthwhile finding out more about this “living together” arrangement, and we can only hope it will last, and remain peaceful!

Martine Buron

PES, France (1988-1994)

martineburon@wanadoo.fr



Meeting with the Head of the Government of AP Voivodina

THE YOUNG GENERATION

Wherever you go, talking to young people can provide an accurate insight into a country's development. We were therefore keen to find out what questions the Belgrade students would have for us. It came as no surprise that their questions primarily concerned the EU's relationship with Russia, Turkey and, of course, Kosovo. There was a tangible sense of disappointment that we no longer see Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. In late July, a survey conducted by the Belgrade Institute for European Affairs revealed that some 55% of the population wants their country to join the EU. That said, the majority of young Serbians under the age of 29 tend to favour closer links with Russia. As many as 51% of them even want negotiations with the EU to be halted. Former deputy minister of education Prof. Srbijanka Turajlic puts this down to the fact that young people are often unaware of the unfortunate role that Serbia played in the wars in Yugoslavia and that, regrettably, they are not taught everything about their country's recent history. In a personal discussion after the meeting, one student talked about the Croatian

genocide of Serbs and nationalists in Kosovo who are still calling for a Greater Albania, but the term "Srebrenica" meant nothing to her! This should definitely set alarm bells ringing. There is a danger that the discussion about losing Kosovo is masking important internal issues in Serbia, such as unemployment, poorly paid jobs, future economic development, corruption, the role of the media, and the trustworthiness of politicians. To be fair, I should mention that we also met young people who were open-minded and optimistic about their country's potential future in the EU. Through their own personal commitment, they hope to play their part in the emergence of a free, democratic constitutional state, however far off that may seem today. As I see it, there are two ways of bringing the majority of young people round to the idea of Serbia becoming part of the European family, which does make sense geographically.

1. Education, education, education! In October, the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe published a new set of textbooks covering the period from

the Second World War to 2008, the result of a collective history project. Historians from almost all the states of former Yugoslavia contributed to the research, with the aim of providing a balanced account of the historical events. Unfortunately, the textbooks still do not feature on the national curriculum, just like those published in 2006 assessing regional history from the Ottoman Empire to the Second World War. It is up to the teachers to decide whether or not they want to use the materials available to them. It doesn't have to be this way!

2. In its negotiations with Serbia, the Commission needs to do everything in its power to prevent the past from casting a shadow over a bright European future for the country. Tackling this issue in the talks on Chapter 26 ('Education and Culture'), which should hopefully be opened by the end of this year, would seem to be the best way to do so. In addition, student exchanges, red tape-free involvement in the Erasmus programme and financial support for information centres can play a key role in putting EU values across. Young Serbians should be given the chance to visit western European countries and see for themselves, and, now that the visa requirement has finally been lifted, they can be. What is more, the EU offers a unique example of the peaceful resolution of tensions, and tensions are certainly still present in the region. Our delegation was unanimous in wishing Serbia every success.

Gisela Kallenbach
Greens/EFA, Germany (2004-2009)
Gisela_Kallenbach@yahoo.com



Meeting with university students in Serbia

A STUNNING EXPERIENCE

The opportunity to talk with former Members of the European Parliament was an important and informative experience for me and my colleagues attending to this event. It was a special honor to meet representatives of this institution who have most directly influenced key processes evolving on our continent over the past decades. In the course of my studies I seldom had occasion to talk with decision-makers and persons who have witnessed and participated in major political processes, so that I considered this opportunity unique indeed.

I was very impressed by a number of things in this interchange. The dominant impression from the very outset was that of the candor and openness of the MEPs. It was exceptionally important for us to know and understand that we could ask them any question we wanted and really embark on a learning process about the significant elements of today's European Union and the challenges it is confronted with.

As well, the conversation was dynamic, with a large number of the delegation members taking an active part. During the introductions we realized what a large number of countries the MEPs came from as well as that political differences existed among representatives coming from the same state. It was particularly interesting to hear the views of Greek representatives on the economic crisis and the UK representatives perceptions of Brexit. The diverse positions of the MEPs were an important lesson about the functioning of the European Parliament. This patently reflected

the democratic character of this institution as well as the fact that MEPs represent their citizens and not necessarily the politics of their respective states or ruling parties. Apart from this, the questions were addressed to the group as a whole so that, as a rule, MEPs who thought themselves called upon to answer a specific question would reply. It was interesting for us to hear how persons with their experience viewed the process of Serbia's European integration and the fact that we have a specific Chapter 35, account being taken of the on-going process of dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. The importance was stressed of reforms under Chapters 23 and 24 as well as generally within the process, as a mechanism aimed at improving the lives and enhancing the development potentials of primarily young people, but also of all other citizens of Serbia. The issue of refugees and the manner in which the European Union was addressing this challenge were also discussed. We heard different opinions in this regard but the shared position of all was that a common solution and a well-thought-out systematic approach were necessary. Particularly impressive was the united stand on the issue of MEPs from Belgium, The Netherlands, France, Greece, Cyprus and Spain, even though they occupy opposite ideological positions in other respects.

The question of sanctions against Russia was also broached, prompting a discussion on the need for aligning the foreign policies of EU member states and on possible expectations from future members.



Stefan Vukojevic

The question of Kosovo was particularly emphasized, as a number of colleagues wished to know if recognition of its independence was a precondition for Serbia's accession to the European Union, especially bearing in mind the fact that a number of EU members have not recognized this state. The prevalent answer was that what mattered the most was to honor the agreements reached in the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. Generally, the openness and directness of the MEPs in communication on this as well as on all other topics was my principal impression.

Another issue that was discussed was the possibility for young people from Serbia and the region to be educated and find employment in the European Union, with focus on Erasmus programs and the European Voluntary Service. Experiences were shared that will certainly assist me in my future efforts at continued personal and professional development.

Stefan Vukojevic
University student, Serbia
stefan.vukojevich@gmail
Twitter: @vukac1995