

CAFÉ EUROPE

Small Montenegro's big project

Gordana Djurovic and the EU questionnaire

Kristof Bender 30 July 2010



Gordana Djurovic. Photo: Belgrade Security Forum

As minister for European integration, Gordana Djurovic became Montenegro's public face on EU issues and has traveled throughout Europe to persuade leaders to give Montenegro an opportunity to prove itself. She helped formulate Montenegro's image as a small Balkan country which creates no problems, has good relations with its neighbours and is committed to reform.

On 21 May 2006, Montenegro's population of some 620,000 people had to make the most important decision in the country's recent history: did they want their country to become independent or should it remain in a loose state union with Serbia? According to a compromise between government and opposition, brokered by the EU, a 55% percent majority was required for independence.

Gordana Djurovic, then-minister for international economic relations and European integration and currently Montenegro's minister of European integration, was at home with her cousin and their children, waiting for the preliminary results to be announced.

"It was very hard to predict the outcome. I had no idea. In fact, nobody was sure who would win ... At ten, the celebrations began, and there was a lot of waving of red flags [Montenegro's national flag]. I never imagined that this would happen, this kind of energy and synergy in such a small place. It was an important night for us all."

Djurovic had made her contribution towards Montenegro's independence; in the coming years, she would help move Montenegro closer to EU membership. She became Montenegro's public face on EU issues and has traveled throughout Europe to persuade leaders to give Montenegro an opportunity to prove itself. She helped formulate Montenegro's image as a small Balkan country which creates no problems, has good relations with its neighbours and is committed to reform.

"A lot of people in Europe call us the boring part of the Western Balkans," Djurovic says laughing. "Montenegro is the country that produces good news."

Born in Novi Knezevac in Serbia in 1964, Djurovic spent her youth between Serbia and Montenegro. At the age of 14, she moved with her parents to Herceg-Novci at the Montenegrin coast. She returned to Serbia to study at the Faculty of Economics in Belgrade, but settled in Podgorica in 1986 with her husband, a Montenegrin whom she had met in Belgrade during her studies. In 1991, she completed her Master's at the faculty of economics in Podgorica, and, in 1994, her PhD.

"I feel that Montenegro is my country. I finished my education here. I have raised my two children here. I have completely linked my career and plans for the future with this country."

Djurovic was asked by Montenegro's long-time prime minister Milo Djukanovic to join the government in 2004. Before her appointment, she pursued an academic career, focusing on the economic development of countries in transition, often using Montenegro as a case study, and on European economic integration. She also worked on projects designing economic development strategies for the government.

“I was invited as a professor, an expert, to join the government, and I still feel like a professional in the government, even after seven years. It is important for me to preserve this professionalism.”

In 2004, Montenegro and Serbia were still joined in an unhappy union. When Djurovic became the minister for international economic relations and European integration, one of her first tasks was to lobby the EU for a “twin-track approach” towards the two countries with regard to the economic aspects of the Stabilisation and Association Process. This approach would acknowledge that there was no single economic space and no unified trade and customs policies in Serbia-Montenegro, so that the European Commission would assess and address the economic systems separately.

“It was in a small restaurant near [Montenegro’s historic capital] Cetinje called ‘Belvedere’, sometime in late July 2004, after yet another disappointing meeting between the Serbian-Montenegrin delegation and the European Commission, that the representatives of the Commission finally decided that a single approach was not possible – at least not in the economic sphere. I always like to look at this restaurant when I drive by. In terms of the economy, it was the start of independence. It was a small but very important battle that we won.”

In September 2004, the European Commission officially introduced the twin-track approach. This also meant that Montenegro and Serbia could apply for WTO membership individually. In early 2005, Djurovic was appointed head of Montenegro’s negotiating team for WTO accession, and a few months later, she became the head of the Montenegrin team negotiating – initially together with Serbia – the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the Commission.

The SAA negotiations began in October 2005, but came to a halt on 3 May 2006 due to Serbia’s failure to arrest indicted war criminal Ratko Mladic before the expiry of an EU-imposed deadline. This arguably provided a small but important boost for the independence camp when Montenegrin voters decided about independence in the referendum on 21 May 2006. With independence finally declared on 3 June 2006, the SAA negotiations with Montenegro were re-launched in September 2006 and finalised three months later.

“After independence, there were a lot of challenges, but one thing that I am very proud of is the completion of the SAA negotiations. We demonstrated that soon after independence we could complete these negotiations, in just a few months. We were able to negotiate the

agreement, initial it, sign it, and confirm it in our parliament. It was very important because, like for all the countries in the region, it was the first contractual agreement with the EU."



Gordana Djurovic. Photo: University of Montenegro

Montenegro was determined to advance further on the path towards joining the EU, but it was not easy. The “golden era of enlargement,” as Djurovic calls the late 1990s and the period before May 2004, was over.

“Back then, there was a lot of good will. It was predictable that the fifth enlargement would be completed soon – in a Big Bang enlargement. This will never happen again. Since 2004, there have been five, six years of new European acquis, many new demands and requests. So, in comparison with the late 1990s, the golden era of enlargement, this period now is ‘enlargement plus’. So it has been quite hard for Montenegro and the Western Balkans.”

Montenegro wanted to apply for EU membership soon after the SAA was officially signed in October 2007. The Commission and EU member states, in particular Germany, France and the Netherlands, advised against it. It was not until December 2008 that Montenegro finally received a green light to submit its application under the French Presidency. The Council then took four months before it asked the Commission to prepare an opinion on the application (*avis*). On 22 July 2009, Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn finally arrived in Podgorica to present the Commission’s questionnaire to Prime

Minister Djukanovic. Djurovic was charged with coordinating the completion of the questionnaire.

“We began working on the questionnaire on the 1 August. It meant no holiday and whole days of work in 40 degree temperatures. We completed it as planned, in four months. But then we received additional questions and sent answers in April 2010. In total, there were about 2,800 questions; including sub-questions, about 5,000 questions. We responded in three cycles, in almost 6,000 pages, with 11,000 pages of annexes, so the whole package was about 17,000 pages. For us it was a very difficult period, because the questions were very demanding. It was the biggest administrative project ever organised by the Montenegrin administration. We are very proud of how we managed to do it, given that our administration is the smallest in the region.”

The challenge was not simply to get replies from all the civil servants, but to get good replies and translate them into good English.

“IT support was crucial. We created a specific portal as a sharing point for all line ministries. I was ‘Big Brother’ and monitored everybody’s results daily on an internal government portal. They had authorised access from their offices – about 800 authorised addresses in our Montenegrin administration – so every day they could enter and answer questions or, based on group work, write replies. Then it would be checked and sent to the verification commission and then finally to the government.

Translation was a major issue. We organised a public tender, an invitation for all local translators. Then, based on EC criteria, we tested them, and we selected 200 translators that would be involved in the process of translation. We equipped a translation centre, which was open 24/7, where they could work and use translation support. We adopted a manual for translation how they would translate specific EU terms or names of institutions and laws to have unified translations.”

On 9 December 2009, prime minister Djukanovic presented the replies to Commissioner Rehn. Now Montenegro is waiting for the opinion of the Commission, hoping that it will recommend candidate status and the opening of accession negotiations. The avis should be published in November 2010. Djurovic is optimistic.

“Following the referendum, some people claimed that Montenegro would not even have enough money for food, to live and to eat ... Now, when we talk about it four years later, I think Montenegro confirms

that it really functions. We have our legal framework, our institutions, and capacities to face the challenges of the future. We can also show concrete results. I think Montenegro is on the right track.” ■