

Serbia Should be Brave

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H. E. Mette Kjuel Nielsen, Ambassador of Denmark to Serbia, has dealt with the Balkans from different perspectives for the last twenty years. She came to Serbia from the position of Head of Department for Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia, the Western Balkans, OSCE and Council of Europe. Ms. Nielsen held that position, when Denmark last had the EU Presidency, with all the challenges that entailed, including helping to ensure that the enlargement perspective for the countries of the western Balkans was mentioned in the conclusion in December 2002, when the big enlargement of the EU (the fifth enlargement) was agreed. She had the unusual responsibility of being in charge of the reburial of the last Czars mother, Maria Feodorovna, a Danish Princess (Dagmar), who had to flee Russia in 1918 and was ultimately buried in Denmark in 1928. For four years she was undersecretary for international affairs in the Danish Ministry of Defence, and political advisor to the US General for SFOR in Bosnia in 1997. In the early 1990's she was posted to the Danish Mission at the UN, and then assigned to the Security Policy Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Her assignment in Serbia is her first ambassadorship.

■ Considering the fact that Serbian integration into the EU is one of the most important political issues at the moment, what are your thoughts on the current position of Serbia and it's European future?

- The next moves are in Serbia's hands and I am optimistic. Serbia is a European country and belongs in the EU. With the present government, your membership perspective has become very concrete, with noticeable milestones reached. All these milestones have been reached in response to clear progress and reforms. Recently the EU Commission issued, in my view, a very positive opinion on Serbia. Recognizing the considerable progress made, including praising the closure of The Hague Tribunal list of wanted people. The

opinion also pointed to a number of areas where continual and systematic reforms are necessary, such as the judiciary, fight against corruption, structural weaknesses in the economic sector, energy efficiency and environmental protection. The Serbian Government recognises all of these areas equally as priorities in the further reform process.

Following the opinion, candidacy status for Serbia is within close reach. A decision will be made on the 9th December by all the EU countries. The recommendation is on the understanding that Serbia reengages in dialogue with Kosovo and implements good faith agreements. If I may be so bold as to offer a piece of advice, Serbia should not only aim for the minimum necessary, but continue the good trends, and put the clear aspirations and policy choices up front. Serbia should be brave and show clear intentions. This would be noticed. Serbia's future lies within the EU. The EU has been your close and reliable partner since 2000 to help build up Serbia's economy and society. The overwhelming investment inflow into Serbia has come from EU countries. The EU countries are also by far the largest trading partners for Serbia, with 56% of total trade in 2010. And when it comes to financial assistance and donations, the EU is the overwhelmingly largest donor with a total of 2.2 Billion Euros since 2001. On top of this comes the sizable bilateral assistance from the individual EU countries, including Denmark.

■ On one occasion, you said that although it does not seem to be so, there are similarities between Serbia and Denmark. What are those similarities?

- I had in mind the population size, history and background – for instance the importance of the agricultural sector in employment and the economy, and also the challenges in green growth, energy efficiency and environmental protection. Serbian cities, public utilities, households and energy companies can learn from our experience over the last thirty years. Serbia can, so to “skim the cream” speak, and jump straight into taking advantage of our experiences and state of the art technological innovations by Danish companies.

■ There is a lot of cooperation on projects between Denmark and Serbia. Which of these projects do you consider to be the most significant?

- They are all important. We have a close and longstanding bilateral relationship at many levels and in many fields. If I should highlight some, I would mention the close cooperation between our defense establishments, where we assist in modernizing Serbian Defence. Serbia is our largest bilateral assistance partner in Europe in the defence field. In South Serbia, we have two major programmes that focus on employment and growth. One is focusing on developing SME's, and the newest is a joint programme with the Serbian Ministry of Agriculture. This program has been running for a year, and has, in my view, huge potential. It targets one of the poorest areas of Serbia in need of good news and focused assistance.

The intention is to create employment and income locally, awareness of what is needed to meet EU standards and to increase the value of products and generate export income. Serbia is already a very good producer of fruit, which is an important export commodity.

■ Based on your experience in Serbia, what are the most important issues that Serbian society should deal with, and which of those should our politicians prioritize?

- The focus should be on the economy, creating jobs and growth. An improved investment climate and further steps to deal with red tape and cumbersome administrative procedures will be attractive for foreign and national investors. The recent White Book from FIC points to a number of areas that should be addressed. In many ways, Serbia is still suffering from a setback in modernization and economic development caused by the Milosevic years and it

has still not reached the economic level it had in 1990. The fight against corruption is also very important.

As for the issues in Serbian society, one should always be careful in making this kind of comment, so I will do so with caution and hope that it is received with the same kindness that it is given. I would recommend a little more positive spirit. Things have changed tremendously since 2000. When I look back on the years I have been in Serbia; it is a positively different society today than when I arrived in September 2007. It is visible in the streets, in infrastructure, in political life, in everyday life, in public debate etc. The Serbian words “strasno” and “nije normalno”, and sentences starting “how come...” should be rationed to a maximum of one a day.

■ Denmark has the lowest level of corruption. How do you succeed to achieving such an important goal?

- We do not tolerate corruption. We have laws and regulations that ensure transparency and minimize the temptation to be corrupt. Also institutions and big companies have a zero tolerance policy as part of their corporate social responsibility. Public institutions have strict rules about gifts – what is appropriate, what is not. If ministers receive gifts on trips, they have to declare them. Of course, there are rotten apples in Denmark like everywhere else, but I think

that part of our success in keeping corruption so low is the attitude that has been built and nourished in all societal institutions. It is an attitude reinforced by laws, regulations and procedures.

■ Environmental issues, energy efficiency and ecological topics are very important to you personally, and to Denmark. Since 2009, the Danish Embassy has been a “green embassy”. Can you explain to our readers the concept of a “green embassy”?

- A “green embassy” means being energy efficient and taking care of the environment. Within the first 8 months, we managed to save 30% on our electricity bill. This has happened, primarily, with simple measures. It has actually been a pleasure for me, that in addition to talking about Denmark and Danish companies being at the forefront of green growth and energy efficiency, I can also give a concrete example on how individual decisions matter.



■ What do you think of the ecological and environmental consciousness in Serbia and how much can we learn from your country on that issue?

- We recycle at the embassy. Paper, plastic, glass, aluminum and batteries. We all bring these items from our homes to the embassy and recycle them. The glass recycling we do together with other embassies. When I travel around Serbia, I

see a steadily growing awareness in young people about the importance of protecting the environment. And there is so much we, as individuals, can do in addition to government policy and action. Discarded aluminum cans for example take many years to break down naturally, if they are recycled, the raw material can be reused in new productions. With the

increasing demands for raw material in a globalised world, recycling becomes an asset. What we look at as waste – is actually worth money. This is a completely new attitude to waste. Handled correctly a large proportion of our waste can be sorted and reused, some can be incinerated and provide district heating, and only a small proportion will have to go into land dumps.

■ Various research shows that Denmark is the country where people are the happiest in Europe. Is there any recipe for happiness that Denmark could give to Serbia?

- The most amazing thing is that we top the list repeatedly. We have a well-organized society, with a high degree of social security. That could be one explanation. Then, we also have one of the highest tax-rates in the world and our weather is not that great. In Denmark, the system (society) takes care of people who cannot take care of themselves. In Serbia, you take care of each other. Which is best? It is difficult to say. I am happy. Why? Well, why not? It is much better to be happy than unhappy. If you have a choice: look at the glass as half full – or use humor: it does not matter if the glass is half full or half empty, as long as it has got Rakija in it. Preferably dunja.