

On the fast track to reform

Seizing the momentum in Montenegro



From the perspective of a country with strong European roots now making every effort to get its democratic institutions up and running, the OSCE represents all the internationally prescribed standards and commitments that Montenegro — the world's newest State — is striving to live up to, says President Filip Vujanovic.

OSCE/INSTA BOZOVIC

BY SUSANNA LÖÖF

Office of the President, Podgorica — Montenegro's chances of moving rapidly towards accession to the European Union are "great" and "realistic", President Filip Vujanovic told the *OSCE Magazine* in early October. By the end of this year, Montenegro expects to sign the European Union's Stabilization and Association Agreement — the first legal step towards its accession.

The country has world-renowned natural scenery that is attracting tourists and investors, a sound economic development framework, and — with just 630,000 inhabitants — a favourable demographic profile.

"In countries with relatively small territories and populations, it is faster and easier to undertake reforms," said the 52-year-old head of State, who was elected in May 2003 for a five-year term after having served as Acting President for six months. Earlier, he also held the post of Prime Minister for four years.

In contrast to the long road to the EU, entry into the OSCE took only 19 days. After

the referendum on Montenegro's legal status as a State on 21 May and the declaration of independence on 3 June, the Government made known its wish to join the OSCE before any other organization. Less than three weeks later, on 22 June, Montenegrin Ambassador Vesko Garcevic took his seat in the Permanent Council.

On 1 September, a related momentous event took place in Finland. The Prime Minister of Montenegro at the time, Milo Djukanovic, signed the Helsinki Final Act in Finlandia Hall — where the Yugoslav leader, Marshall Tito, had signed the landmark document 31 years earlier.

President Vujanovic said the fast accession of Montenegro to the OSCE was "the best evidence of the good co-operation between us", adding: "This kind of attitude is highly appreciated."

He said he regarded the Organization as a supportive partner of Montenegro as it continued on its challenging reform path. "The OSCE can help us in our efforts to adopt standards set by the EU," he said. "So far, we have received extraordinary assistance

President Filip Vujanovic

Republic of Montenegro
Estimated population of 630,000 by ethnicity
(2003 census)

Montenegrins: 43.2 per cent

Serbs: 32 per cent

Bosniaks: 7.8 per cent

Albanians 5 per cent

Muslims: 3.9 per cent

Undeclared and undefined: 4.3 per cent

Other: 3.8 per cent

Source: Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT)

from the Organization in all areas of reform — whether it relates to public administration, the judiciary and the police, or the media. We expect this support to become even more intensive as we carry the processes through to their full completion.”

In the recent past, the political landscape in Montenegro was dominated by a debate about whether the Adriatic republic should become independent or stay in a union with Serbia. That debate culminated in a referendum, which was observed by the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

“We are very proud of the way we conducted the referendum and its outcome,” President Vujanovic said. “The process that the people of Montenegro went through in solving a sensitive, crucial, strategic and historic issue demonstrated their democratic maturity.”

The President also remarked on how the messages conveyed by the referendum exercise on the one hand, and by decades of conflicts within the region on the other, could not have been more drastically different.

“It gives me particular joy that the country managed to prove that it can offer a good ‘space’ for democracy, with both the State and its citizens committed to further democratization.”

With the independence issue settled, the country has been able to turn its attention to tackling other challenges: The unemployment rate is almost 30 per cent and the per capita GDP, estimated at 2,648 euros in 2005, lags behind that of other former Yugoslav countries.

“Our priority is to improve the social and economic climate,” President Vujanovic said. “Our responsibility is to maintain macro-economic stability, continue encouraging investment flows into Montenegro, and create competitive conditions for the development of entrepreneurship.”

Susanna Löf, a Press Officer in the Secretariat’s Press and Public Information Section, wrote this special focus on Montenegro.

Helsinki, 1 September 2006. Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen looks on as the Prime Minister of Montenegro at the time, Milo Djukanovic, signs the Helsinki Final Act in Finlandia Hall, where Marshall Tito signed the document as President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia 31 years earlier.



Montenegro’s famous coastline is 293 km long. The country borders Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania, Croatia and Italy over the Adriatic Sea.

Map courtesy of Montenegro Tourism Centre



FOREIGN MINISTRY OF FINLAND/HARRI KILPI

“A huge responsibility”

Partnering with the world’s newest country

Post-independence transition brings with it new rights as well as greater responsibilities. This holds true not only for the world’s newest country but also for the OSCE’s newest mission, Ambassador Paraschiva Badescu said in an interview with Susanna Löf shortly after her appointment as the first Head of the OSCE Mission to Montenegro.

PODGORICA — As Montenegro was transformed from a republic within a union into an independent State, the OSCE presence underwent its own transformation. The Office in Podgorica, which had been run since January 2002 on the principle of “substantial autonomy” under the former Mission to Serbia and Montenegro, became independent from its Belgrade headquarters on 29 June, barely a month after its host republic became the world’s newest country.

A fully-fledged status has injected fresh impetus into the Podgorica-based OSCE field presence and has meant increased visibility in Vienna and elsewhere. However, on the ground, much remains the same as it was in the past five years, particularly regarding programmed activities, said Ambassador Paraschiva Badescu.

“We are continuing our activities in all areas — democratization, legislative reform and institution-building, reform of the media and the police, and environmental protection and economic development,” she said.

A memorandum of understanding was signed on 24 October in Vienna by Montenegrin Foreign Minister Miodrag Vlahovic and OSCE Secretary General Marc Perrin de Brichambaut, setting out the conditions governing the new relationship.

“What is different about our new mandate is that it is even more comprehensive than before; it requests us to work in matters such as military security and defence reform,” said Ambassador Badescu, a Romanian diplomat who traces her direct involvement in CSCE/OSCE politico-military issues to the early 1990s.

Fortunately, the Mission is spared having to grapple with post-conflict challenges



OSCE/ARISTO BOZOVIC

Ambassador Paraschiva Badescu

faced by several other OSCE operations in the region. It also benefits from an enthusiastic host country.

“We have a major advantage in that the OSCE is a welcome presence here. Our Mission has been established at the country’s request, and it has a high profile relative to other organizations,” Ambassador Badescu said.

“So now our task is to meet the high expectations, to build the Mission’s capacity to help, and to reinforce our partners’ generally

As part of an OSCE project supporting citizen education and information centres, hundreds of citizens were surveyed in the municipality of Ulcinj to draw them closer to the work of local administrators.



OSCE/OMICKA SARENAC

positive perception of our work. This is a huge responsibility.”

The Mission includes 15 international and 30 national staff members. The Police Training Centre in Danilovgrad, near the capital, has also come under the Mission’s wing.

Montenegrin officials listen intently to what the OSCE Mission has to say, and they often take it into account. “Knowing that our voice is listened to gives us an even greater sense of responsibility,” the Ambassador said. “My staff and I take special care not to impose unwanted solutions. Co-operation is key.”

This does not mean, however, that the Mission does not express constructive criticism when the situation calls for it, she said. “Our hosts do appreciate this frankness. They welcome being advised in a timely manner so that they can initiate improvements and avoid making mistakes.”

The statehood issue having absorbed much of the country’s attention and resources, the ruling coalition’s top priorities have moved on to consolidating statehood, bringing about integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, and improving the country’s economic performance through sweeping reforms.

Beyond these, a host of other interlinked issues are high on the agenda as well.

“Young democracies that are emerging from decades of centralized rule are confronted with the struggle against corruption, organized crime and trafficking in human beings, and related rule-of-law problems that

come with more openness,” Ambassador Badescu said. “Montenegro is no different. Corruption does exist and organized crime is also present. The issue is whether there is a political will to eradicate these phenomena.”

And does she think that a political will exists in Montenegro?

“The authorities acknowledge the issues and there is no lack of will,” the Ambassador says. “Whether there is enough of it is of course debatable. All the necessary mechanisms have been established, but the challenge is to make them work properly.”

The Mission will continue to be engaged in this area, as reflected in its ambitious programme in law enforcement and good governance.

At a recent summit meeting of south-eastern European leaders held in Serbia, which focused on the fight against organized crime and terrorism, Montenegrin President Filip Vujanovic pledged a “strengthened resolve to fulfil standards in this field, as a precondition for [Montenegro’s] further democratic development and its European and Euro-Atlantic integration”. He cited details of the OSCE’s assistance and recommendations towards meeting these standards.

As the OSCE Mission’s host country tackles its comprehensive institutional, political and economic reforms affecting practically every aspect of security, Ambassador Badescu and her staff are keen to assist in any way they can.

“I’m very proud of the OSCE’s achievements here over the past five years, but I’m also well aware that much remains to be done and that major challenges still lie ahead,” she said.



A Romanian stamp to commemorate the signing of the Helsinki Final Act was issued in 1975 with the help of Ambassador Badescu. Three decades later, independent Montenegro was to sign the historic document in Helsinki.

Aiming high in Montenegro

Roma scholars discover a wider world

When Senad Sejdovic, 31, was growing up, he saw his future options as limited. As a Roma, he thought, he could only hope to land a menial job. But that was before he took part in a two-year OSCE project that aimed to empower the Roma community in Montenegro. Today, he is a freelance journalist with his own show on public radio. In an interview with Susanna Lööf for the *OSCE Magazine*, Mr. Sejdovic was brimming with new-found confidence.



“My son can be anything he wants: doctor, lawyer, anything,” Mr. Sejdovic said, referring to Kristijan, born just two weeks earlier. “All professions will be open to him.”

An OSCE project, “Developing Roma Leadership Potential in Montenegro”, financed by the Netherlands Government, helped him and about 50 others to widen their horizons. By breaking into new fields, they are serving as catalysts for change in the country’s disadvantaged Roma community.

To groom them to become Montenegro’s first Roma journalists, the project sent Mr.

Sejdovic and six other young people through six months of rigorous training. They spent half of this time in newspaper offices and broadcasting studios.

In addition, under the project, five young Roma began university studies and 20 attended high school. Twenty were trained in every aspect of running non-governmental organizations. Several of the participants also attended workshops to

learn how to overcome psychological and sociological barriers.

When the project was launched in 2004, the group doubted that it would result in anything, Mr. Sejdovic said. But as it went on, perceptions started changing.

“Now we are setting our sights higher,” he said. “We know that more doors are open to us, that everything is possible provided we do our best to achieve what we want.”

Mr. Sejdovic is certain that his 30-minute show on Radio Montenegro for minority communities, which goes on the air twice a month, is making an impact. “In my previous job, I worked only for myself. Over the radio, I can influence members of my community,” he said. “I can convince them that pursuing an education is worthwhile.”

He peppers his show with advice on the rights and responsibilities of Roma as citizens of Montenegro to reduce his community’s isolation. Roma often avoid approaching public institutions even for simple issues such as asking for identity cards. “By giving them the right information about rules and procedures, I hope I can bring them closer to the institutions of Montenegro,” Mr. Sejdovic said.

Profile of Montenegro’s Roma community

Official estimate: 2,601

Informal estimate: 20,000

Unemployment rate: 43 per cent

Illiteracy rate: 76 per cent

Senad Sejdovic, journalist



Anita Zeciri, law student



Alexandar Zekovic, Director of the Roma Scholarship Foundation, stands next to a poster of Roma children asking, "Can I, too?", referring to their wish to join formal classes.

Although the project has made a difference in his life, Mr. Sejdovic warned his fellow Roma against expecting too much, too soon. For one, he and his family cannot yet live solely on his income as a freelance journalist and has had to take on another job in a clothing market. "It takes at least 60 years to bring about even a little change," he said.

To ensure that the project lives on, an independent Roma Scholarship Foundation, which also serves as an information centre, has been created. Initially wholly financed by the project, the Foundation is expected to stand on its own feet by the end of the year.

It is close to that goal, said Alexandar Zekovic, the Foundation's director, adding: "Our vision is a Montenegro in which Roma are integrated into society."

The Foundation has helped some 50 Roma students to either complete or start high school, and is currently supporting 25 students who are in high school or are taking classes to prepare themselves for high school equivalency exams.

The project's impact extends beyond the Roma community. "The public perceives Roma people as beggars

and criminals, but our work is helping break down prejudices. We are proving that Roma can be successful students, that they can be good journalists, and that the Roma NGO sector is very capable," Mr. Zekovic said.

"We are also proving to Roma that not everything depends on the government, that a lot depends on their willingness to confront some negative aspects of their traditions."

But some of these traditions, such as marrying early, are hard to counter: Two of the university students supported by the project dropped out to get married.

Anita Zeciri is determined not to be among them. Working as a part-time assistant at a prestigious Podgorica law firm, she ponders a future in international law. When she graduates from university, she will be the first Montenegrin Roma with a law degree.

This does not make her feel special, however. "I think it's sad that I'll only be the first one," she said. "There should have been more before me."

The OSCE project and the Foundation have not only financed her studies, they have also helped her personal growth. "I used to be shy and found it difficult to make any decisions," she said. "Now I am much more confident about what I want."

Although elementary school children were not the project's target group, the benefits have trickled down to them, said Ivana Vujovic, a National Education Officer at the OSCE Mission who helped run the project.

"This year, the number of Roma children enrolled in the first grade went up enormously, which is a great success," she said.

Ms. Vujovic is convinced that this is because the young Roma who are benefiting from the project are looked up to as role models within their settlements. "The community is rather small, and they know each other," she said.

Ambassador Paraschiva Badescu, Head of the OSCE Mission to Montenegro, said the project has built a core of educated Roma leaders who will be able to take on the problems of poverty and illiteracy in their community. "That is why it is so important to focus on long-term education."

The Roma and Sinti populations in Europe migrated from India between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. They dispersed across Europe and developed diverse communities, some with their own dialects. Several million Roma live in Europe today, making them the continent's largest minority. Often linked together pejoratively under the term "gypsies", alongside ethnically unrelated groups, Roma have been persecuted throughout their history and were victims of the Holocaust. Discrimination and exclusion still characterize the lives of most Roma today, reflected in racist violence and high levels of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and infant mortality.

– from the *Action Plan of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area*, adopted in December 2003 by the Ministerial Council meeting in Maastricht, the Netherlands



More information about the Roma Scholarship Foundation in Montenegro is available at www.fsr.cg.yu/en.