



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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LICHT: *I always say the same thing: I'm blessed. I really think I'm a blessed person because I am independent. The moment you work for the government—the moment you have serious boss above you—it is a different story.*

GAVRILIS: I think that this is probably a good way to start the interview. Today is the 22nd of May. For the record, I'm here at BFPE (Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence) in the center of Belgrade with Sonja Licht who is BFPE's president. Sonja, thank you—you were an incredible help to me my first week here.

LICHT: *My pleasure.*

GAVRILIS: Also, I am putting on the record how wonderful it has been to work with the office and to be part of the training. I'm going to give a training myself next. I have so many questions. The great thing is that because you're close to the government but out of it, you can really give me a good perspective.

You know that in the case study, we decided that we would really focus on SEIO (Serbian European Integration Office) and things like communications and the questionnaire. That has changed. I think there are so many bigger parts to the process, and we're trying to learn as much as possible. Maybe it would be useful in starting like this. I am very curious to know about the transition between 2007-2008 and the election in terms of what it meant for the accession process.

LICHT: *I would say that it meant more in general political terms, then as far as the accession process is concerned. Why? Because that government already was clearly determined to follow the European integration path. Whatever happened later with Mr. (Vojislav) Kostunica and his Party and their decision to turn their back to the European Union is a completely different story.*

During the time when he was the prime minister, many things happened that were very much crucial for the accession process.

GAVRILIS: When Kostunica was prime minister?

LICHT: *Yes, when Kostunica was prime minister. I would say Kostunica's time was very much determined by things that had to be cleared up before we seriously could become a candidate and could start the negotiations. Meaning cooperation with The Hague and the Kosovo issue. Of course, cooperation with both was very, very difficult. No doubt that Kostunica—and he never made a secret of it—is a nationalist, a democratic nationalist, as I think he will determine himself. But when he inherited the situation in which The Hague was really opening up the case—meaning, I think, in his time when there were forty people that were extradited. Everybody forgets this. It is a huge number for a small country with all levels, heads of military headquarters, and this and that. No doubt he did it with a very, very uneasy feeling, but that's not important for us.*

The important thing is that, during that period, a lot has happened in cooperation with The Hague. What didn't happen was absolutely crucial as well, and these were the Mladic and Karadzic extraditions, as we know. These two characters, which were, of course for different reasons, extremely important I would say also symbolically, were extradited during the (Boris) Tadic rule. Although, as you know, Tadic was already the President during the Kostunica time and there was a kind of duality, the Tadic part of the story—including, at one point, people are

saying the government was pushing more at some others—but already, at that time, the socialists (the Socialist Party of Serbia – headed in the nineties by Slobodan Milosevic) started really changing gears and going into this pro-European discourse.

Now, I would say that there were two parallel processes: one was the political process which was almost entirely determined by the cooperation with the Hague Tribunal and the whole Kosovo issue, and the other one was the EU accession. I must say that in numerous moments, you could have the feeling that these two things are really parallel and [have] almost nothing to do with each other, meaning that the office was doing very well. This was the time when professor Tanja Miscevic was heading the office.

GAVRILIS: The European Integration Office.

LICHT: *The [Director of the] European Integration Office who was not a member and still is not a member of any party. But the very fact that this is the same person who was invited by Aleksandar Vucic to be the chief negotiator with the EU on behalf of Serbia tells you a lot. Many people—including (Srdjan) Majstorovic and others—were there during the Kostunica lead Government and they were doing their work as much as it was possible in a situation where there was this really dark shadow that was determining everything. We would take one step in the right direction and then, again, there was this problem: “What about Karadzic and Mladic? As long as you don’t completely finish the cooperation with The Hague, you can’t move forward.”*

By the way, you had a similar situation in Croatia with the different dynamics with Gotovina. As long as Gotovina was not extradited, they were halted; and then in brackets or without brackets; and then Gotovina was liberated, because there is not enough evidence allegedly to really sentence him.

So one could have a long, long discussion about this whole process.

GAVRILIS: So during this period, if I could ask, I understand that support for the EU accession process among the public is high in that there is a lot of interest despite everything that is going on.

LICHT: Yes.

GAVRILIS: So what explains that dynamic?

LICHT: *Of course, one could speculate. I don’t remember now too well all the details of the opinion polls and so on, but I would say the following thing. The highest levels of support for European integration were after ’99. It looks like a paradox. On one hand, many of those countries that were member states were part of the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) campaign, and yet people really understood and politically matured. It became obvious for them that the only way out of this quagmire that the whole country found itself in was to become part of the European family of nations and people. So this, I think, still was very much present in those years. The (Zoran) Djindjic government no doubt made a serious emphasis on the necessity of European integration. Of course, Djindjic also had to do a number of very unpopular things. You know, extraditing Slobodan Milosevic was not an easy process, but he did it. This did not hurt this high level of support too much. People, I would say, were really convinced that it will be a short-term and easier process. I must also say that some politicians*

played, in my opinion, very irresponsibly with the dates. For example, Zoran Zivkovic, who was the interim prime minister after Djindjic's assassination, was talking of 2007 as the date when we can enter the EU.

I would also say the fact that Djindjic was killed and understood that he was killed as a European brought the famous Serbian inat.

GAVRILIS: *Inat--Stubbornness.*

LICHT: *Yes, you heard about.*

GAVRILIS: *Turkish word.*

LICHT: *Exactly. So a lot of things in the collective psychology pushed toward that outcome. The real shock—and of course this was the moment when Kostunica decided to call for elections—was the declaration of independence of Kosovo. Then, in fact, you have this emotional shock when the support fails. I must say, it was very much combined with the fact that people started understanding that the process will be much longer, and on the top of everything the world economic crisis started. So, in a way, you had at least three different elements that influenced the public opinion regarding the EU.*

One was the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. The second [was the] understanding that 2012 (mentioned as the potential new [accession] date), absolutely away from reality. And the third one was the beginning of the economic crisis. I must say that I believe that these are three very objective reasons; but at the same time, there were a lot of politician-induced reasons as well. I personally always thought that this playing with dates is very dangerous. In the same time the political class was not able to communicate well enough why the European Union's conditions were so important for us? Why are they often bringing quality per se? Why is it so important to build a serious state and institutions?

So, in a way I think, especially at the beginning, they were thinking that this [is] a self-understandable thing, which it wasn't, and didn't account for the fact that you had a quite politically mature but, at the same time, a very disturbed population. When I speak about emotionally disturbed, I want to note the very difficult economic situation and falling living standards for many, including growing unemployment [in Serbia] on one hand. On the other hand, there is Kosovo which, rationally, people understood is gone, you could see this in all serious opinion polls. But emotionally, it was still a very difficult thing, especially when combined with all these other elements.

GAVRILIS: *A lot of really important milestones in the accession process overlapped across the government. So the visa liberalization, [from] 2007 to 2009, it cut across the government.*

LICHT: *That's right.*

GAVRILIS: *The preparation for the SAA (Stabilization and Association Agreement).*

LICHT: *Started during Kostunica and ended after.*

GAVRILIS: *It was signed after. I guess one of the things I'm trying to understand a little bit better in this project is—I understand that some of these were started in the pre-*

election period—but in the 2008 government, from July 2008 onwards, who were the key people behind the EU accession process? Who were the people that really pushed it forward?

LICHT: As far as political support to the process, I would say the most important person was (Boris) Tadic himself who was more or less in those four years omnipotent. Because, yes he was the President, but he also had a huge influence on the government because the majority party [in government] was his own party. So I would say, politically, it was Tadic himself. As for the real work, Milica Delevic definitely played a very important role. Milica Delevic came in when Tanja Miscevic resigned from her post because [Tanja] said we now need someone, since we signed the SAA, who has real political support and who is part of the political class; and Milica was part of the political class as an outstanding member of the Democratic Party. In fact, Tanja thought that this was a much better choice than for her to continue running the SEIO.

You see, this is also very interesting. I don't know whether people mentioned it to you. This handing over from one personality to the other of the office was never done in a hostile way. Even when the ministers pretend that they are very friendly to each other, there is always that feeling of tension. People are not continuing to cooperate. This was never the case with the European Integration Office. It is so interesting.

Whenever there is a change at the top—for example, Milan Pajevic who succeeded Milica after the Democratic Party lost the elections in 2012—continued to cooperate with all the former directors of the Office.

GAVRILIS: He is the Director who resigned in 2013 when the government was reorganized.

LICHT: That's right. He made an advisory group to the office. All the previous chairs or heads of the office were invited and participated. So I am ready to say that this kind of gathering around the new head and the institution itself never ever happened with any other ministry, or other government office as it happened with SEIO (Serbian European Integration Office).

GAVRILIS: But why?

LICHT: Obviously, the people who were part of that process—in fact always, at least until now—shared this, and this sounds too idealistic, but I dare to say shared this feeling of mission. Whoever it is, from Radmila Milivojevic who was the first one—she is now retired, then she went to Chamber of Commerce of Serbia—to Tanja, to Milica, to Milan Pajevic, to Srdjan—who has been in a way one of the most important backbones of that whole thing until now. The director's position was never understood, even if it was more political, as in the case of Milica, as political in that narrow sense of the word.

So you had the feeling that these are all friends. These are all people who belong to the same block, regardless of politics. Their thinking about European integration policies is more or less on the same line and they are ready to jump in and help each other. This is where you have this feeling that—and of course it is not true that there were no upsets, of course there were downs—but somehow, this integration process was so seriously taken also by the people who were doing it. I'm not talking about the politicians, I'm really talking about the hands-on people—which was SEIO, which was the office.

So, seriously talking, they were able to come out with a result which was serious. No one ever dared to criticize that office as not working well. You had all kinds of other things: you had all kinds of attacks, even the tabloid/press—thank God didn't attack them, because the tabloids do whatever comes to them. Of course, Milica was attacked because of Djilas, and they were playing with her name a lot, but that's a completely different story. As far as the process itself, somehow—except those who were in turn of course politically very much against it within the Kostunica Party after 2008... But again, they criticized the EU, they criticized the politics of pro-European apologies, etcetera, but they didn't criticize the office. It is very interesting. I think the main reason is that they were working mostly below the radar, that they were serious, that no one felt endangered by them., They were inclusive enough and responsible enough and professional enough to somehow develop sensitivity among those who worked with them that it is good for them to be cooperative with the office.

I don't know whether what I am saying makes any sense to you.

GAVRILIS: It does make sense but I wonder to what extent did fear protect the European Integration Office?

LICHT: *Fear of what?*

GAVRILIS: That the European Commission was watching and the delegation was watching and that if they messed with the office it would be bad for the accession.

LICHT: *I am absolutely sure. But again, you say fear. That is what I am saying from day one. That process in itself has such a major attraction that the fear [arose] from a concern that you will get negative points from those where you want to arrive.*

So, of course, the European integration is made part of a broader story. Yes, you have your mentors, you have your schoolteacher or your principal or whatever, so there is someone who is there all the time following how you are doing your homework and checking the boxes. That helps.

When the change happened in 2000, I had the immediate feeling that what we needed in the transition process on all levels—local, , regional and national level—especially in these new policies is someone who I used to call the hold-your-hand people or institutions. I have a feeling that—although very often criticized that they are too much conditioning and they are bureaucrats and technocrats and sometimes even with limited knowledge, which is all true—but still, the way that the [European] Commission is operating as a hand-holding actor is so much more superior to anything else. So yes, there is this interaction all the time with them. Of course it is not perfect, far from.

But you feel as part of a bigger self. You are not left alone. You know that there will be a progress report again. By the way, ESI is very much criticizing right now how the progress reports are being made.

GAVRILIS: Who is criticizing?

LICHT: *The European Stability Initiative (ESI). They are analyzing the whole process and they are very much criticizing it. I think it is important that you look into the latest things they are publishing about this issue. They say that there is a lot of cut and paste. They found a lot of mistakes, etcetera. Of course, this is the bureaucracy there. We know how the whole thing can slip into these kinds of things but there*

is still a lot of real value in those progress reports. I will quote to you Jovan Teokarevic. I don't know whether you saw Jovan.

GAVRILIS: No.

LICHT: *But you probably heard his name.*

GAVRILIS: Yes.

LICHT: *Jovan Teokarevic is teaching at the Faculty of Political Studies and runs an international masters program there as well. He was part of the European Integration Council of the previous government. By the way, it was only the government of 2008 that made this Council play a role. I think I mentioned this a few days ago. Until 2012 the European Integration Council with all the ministers, prime minister, representatives of different sectors (academia, civil society organizations, trade unions, employers' unions) met regularly. It is true that sometimes we met only twice a year, but at least it happened.*

Before, in Kostunica's time, they created this council. I personally found out that I am a member from the media. They didn't even ask me whether I wanted to be one. We never met. So it was a complete fake. Now this government from 2012 is more honest. It didn't even try to pretend. No European Integration Council; I find it a great minus.

I was advocating, advocating and then I gave up because no one responded until now.

GAVRILIS: Sonja, before you complete the story about Teokarevic, tell me what was the history of the formation. Who decided in the 2008-2012 administration to have the European Integration Council?

LICHT: *The government.*

GAVRILIS: Who in the government?

LICHT: *Most probably the prime minister, but again the prime minister was so closely operating with on one hand Boris Tadic and on the other hand Milica Delevic, that I am not sure who gave the first push. Look, the council, as I said, existed from earlier, from the Kostunica time, only it really existed only in the time of Mirko Cvetkovic's government. They didn't even change too much as far as members were concerned except the governmental side; and, for example, for us who were from civil society, academia and so on, I think they kept the same people more or less.*

Jovan Teokarevic was one of the people coming from academia. I remember very well when we had one of the progress reports on the table. Jovan said something which I found so important that I remember the sentence until today. [He said]: "Please listen more to the expert opinion in the country because we told you all these things that are in the progress report, but you need to hear it from Brussels to take it seriously. If you would take us seriously you wouldn't have it in the progress report."

I think that Jovan's statement answers a good part of your questions, and in a good and short form. .

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- GAVRILIS: Do you recall when this took place?
- LICHT: *It would be the progress report from, for example, 2010 or 2009, I'm not quite sure. They have minutes, so it should be somewhere there.*
- GAVRILIS: This brings up an interesting issue, because you've mentioned the government spirit in pushing ahead with the process, SEIO as a strong—
- LICHT: *Tool.*
- GAVRILIS: Nested tool and institution. But at the same time there is the idea that they were going too fast, trying to beat deadlines, to make new deadlines, and to initiate things. So they prepared the NPI before, beforehand.
- LICHT: Yes.
- GAVRILIS: They prepared the answers to the questions even before they're asked to by Brussels.
- LICHT: Yes.
- GAVRILIS: What was the downside of this quick movement?
- LICHT: *I don't think there was any special downside. I understood this move, and in fact I was very much supporting it because we lost so much time. I think, at least in this respect, that the government of 2008-2012 had this feeling of urgency, that so much time had been lost. Again, especially in SEIO, especially with people around European integration, including Bozidar Djelic, [they saw that] so much time was lost, [so they decided] "let us try to somehow make up the loss." Plus they wanted to send a very clear message to Brussels, "We are ready. So please stop this political game with us because we are ready." I must tell you, it was quite a serious message. In fact, from time to time of course, we had these problems that almost everything was done and they would come up and say "yes, yes, but you know this or that is still not perfect."*
- The moment when the extradition process to The Hague was over, I don't think that it was more than 48 hours—really, I'm not joking—when, officially, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs and who knows who else behind him, because the smaller EU countries like to hide behind Germany or other big countries, , came up with "wait a minute, now with Kosovo you have to do this or that."*
- I remember that, for example, Boris Tadic was at one point humanly, extremely disappointed because he thought that at least there will be a period where everybody will recognize—when I say everybody, this is really the decision makers of important powers—that they finished a very, very difficult period. I don't think it was more than 48 hours after (Goran) Hadzic, the last one was extradited, that there was this new major push. "You either do this, this and this with Kosovo or you can forget your European integration process."*
- I must say, we all knew what is there behind the corner or behind the hill, but I really think that from time to time it would be necessary to have a bit more of a subtle approach in international politics. On the other hand, we know that it is not happening. So I was not that surprised. I understood the disappointment of those who put their own skin up front, that they would like to have a few moments of*

break. Obviously, those who were determining the pace thought this is the right time: "so they finished with the one thing, now we push them very, very strong to the other one."

I think Tadic understood it. What he says is that he brought the presidential elections forward in order to get the full mandate as far as Kosovo is concerned. I'm ready to believe him. But on the other hand, I would say, again, it is obvious that fortunately or unfortunately we needed the former tough nationalists to come in power to complete the Brussels Agreement.

The situation is quite obvious. I mean, if Tadic would do it, the entire opposition, especially SNS would, as my husband likes to say, "bite their behind together with others." When they are doing it, of course—the Democratic Party, Liberal Democratic Party and other pro-European organizations and individuals - are not doing the same thing. So they also had for that a very clear space that Tadic didn't have.

On the other hand, both the EU and the US couldn't care less. Let's be clear. They had a clear aim that this thing has to come to closure and a new path opened again. If there would be no EU perspective, I don't think that these guys would do it. I don't think that there would be a détente with Russia if those Nixons and others wouldn't have a clear understanding that, without détente, they can't move forward economically, first of all, economically.

So there has to be an attraction there, and for Vucic, Nicolic, Dacic, and whatever their name is, there is only one real attraction, and that is EU membership. This is where we come back to this story of fear and attraction, and I really think that there is nothing else that can make such major changes as moving from nationalists to pro-Europeans. People love to discuss here how deep it is. Is it skin deep? Is it less than skin deep? At the end of the day, it won't matter. I'm sorry. I don't want to sound cynical. Of course the only issue if 'it will happen' [or] 'it will not.'

As far as whether the issue of European values is firmly on the agenda; we are such a small country that, unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to have a major political discussion on values when you don't have that discussion in the EU or in other parts of the world, I'm sorry to say.

The fact that there is a commission; that there is a process; that it is an organized process; that you develop things step-by-step is extremely important, and I think everybody understood it. Without that, it would be very difficult to go through the state-building process.

I must tell you, I was very surprised that some senior European diplomats were surprised with the statement of Vesna Pusic, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Croatia, last year in Dublin when, at the Summit marking the end of Irish presidency. . Vesna is a sociologist, well educated, she has been a professor of sociology at the university with a lot of international experience. So when she is talking about the accession negotiations with the EU, she is not talking only as a pragmatic, political technocrat.

She said that the accession negotiation process is a state-building process. For me this is obvious. For them it isn't. You see that is very interesting. I found some German, British and other diplomats who were quite surprised with this definition. Of course, the process of creation of the European Community, when they built it

or became members, even the enlargement when Spain, Greece, Portugal joined was a different story than now. Now it is really a state-building process.

Now they make you build the state. This is, in my [opinion], so terribly important. This is why I am praying that the EU continues to exist and continues its enlargement policy. (According to many the most successful EU policy.) I don't see any other mechanism that is so strong as the EU integration story.

GAVRILIS: This is a really great point. Let's talk about state building in Serbia. I know that BFPE focuses a lot on capacity, on training political figures and people in the key ministries. What happened in 2008 and after as the accession process started to reach into the ministries?

LICHT: *It depends. It really depends. It was not at the same depth everywhere. I would say it was deeper in those ministries, which were really on the front line. They had to adapt. The others, such as the Ministry of Education, for example, were achieving less. This is why we still don't have a full accreditation process nationally—a framework of qualifications, etcetera—because, education is always like a stepchild of the European integration process. It is a national process—neither the EU nor individual states want anyone to mingle too much into their education or culture. Of course, through the IPA Funds and other programs, such as the ERASMUS, they are able to intervene but much less than in other fields.*

Then, for those things which are absolutely crucial for the EU—such as the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Energy, etcetera—I would say that there you had more necessity to adapt to these standards. Still, we are far from where we should be; but all these ministries have their units dealing with Europe and integration, including the Ministry of Education.

Then again, the police, the Ministry of Justice, especially through chapters 23 and 24 are taken much more seriously by the commission than before; opening them, as we know, starting with Montenegro from the beginning, and closing the chapters at the end of the negotiations. By the way, I think it is a perfect decision because without the rule of law and serious implementation of laws, we are not going to move anywhere.

*With Bulgaria, there is this story that there were even English words in the Bulgarian laws—I don't know whether it is true or not—because they did not have enough time to fully translate the *Acqui Communautaire*. You don't get too much out of it if you have fantastic laws only. I am going to make now a somewhat heretical statement: Stalin had a very interesting constitution. I mean laws by themselves are not really a guarantee of too much, especially in the countries, which do not have real experience with the rule of law.*

So you have laws and then you have no implementation; you have no bylaws; you have nothing. You have no institution that can implement those laws, and then you really have something which is on paper—a lot of forests destroyed for that paper and that's it. So again, to go back to these ministries that were directly on the front line, they were moving further. Plus you had a number of other things that the commission took as preconditions, like having a serious antidiscrimination law. We didn't have that law before. So antidiscrimination laws, depending on that whole discourse, meant laws on people with handicaps, for example. This was the first one in a series. We had to change our family law; many different things [like] treatment of minorities—a real introduction of minority

councils or giving real power to the minority councils. How it works is a different story.

Then there was the strengthening of the ombudsman office, the introduction of the commissioner for equal rights and antidiscrimination, the state audit, and the agency against corruption. All these new institutional arrangements, or institutions in fact, are part of the state building process.

Again, you can have an anti-corruption agency and still have a lot of corruption, as we proved ourselves. But things don't happen overnight. The fact that politicians, including the President, know now that if they don't give the full documentation of their assets, they can sooner or later be exposed in public is the way to will deal with these things, both corruption but also conflict of interest.

On the other hand, where we failed, where unfortunately the government failed, during 2008-2012 was the reform of the judiciary. They wanted to make a major cut; they wanted to make major structural change. I think it was not thought through enough and they went too fast without really serious preparation.

Now, as for the reform of the judiciary, I have to tell you, I was very much involved with it through the Fund for an Open Society from the end of 2000 until 2003. Very much involved, and in very close cooperation with UNDP (United Nations Development Program), OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), the Council of Europe, and the European Delegation in Serbia. At that time, it was the European Agency for Development and Reconstruction. There was such opposition to this reform and such force against it that it is unbelievable. We managed to mobilize more people than ever from the judiciary, from the legal profession. We tried to make [the judiciary reform process] bottom-up and top-down. With all these international actors included and many others, I mentioned just a few – could also add USAID, the American Bar Association, and many others...

The opposition to the changes was so huge that we failed in a colossal way. So that's where we are. After the failure of the Djindjic government, unfortunately the government of Mirko Cvetkovic didn't have the strength or the knowledge of how to do it either. In my opinion, it is the most difficult story because, whenever you touch the judiciary, you get back the response: "we are independent, you can't do it." And then they don't have the strength or the political will; and the question is how many institutions have them to do it on their own. And here again comes the role of the commission as a crucial one, and of the European Union accession process, because under their auspices this reform will have to be done.

It was not the case in earlier enlargements.. Nothing systematic was done with the judiciary in the enlargement of 2004. They are still paying the price in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary... etcetera. So, they all entered without a really reformed judiciary. After that, the mechanisms for the reform are almost nonexistent.

GAVRILIS: Sonja, since we're speaking about state building, one of the things that comes up is how parts of the government often compete with one another, step on each other's toes.

LICHT: Very often.

GAVRILIS: This certainly affected the prime minister's office and SEIO because, as I understand it, when they started to publish reports on the accession process and the progress, they started to get calls from the ministries.

LICHT: *The problem in Serbia—then we go back to politics because this is immediately going back to politics—[is that] from 2000 on, we had these broad coalitions and it became already a riddle: how many parties are in the government? Because they have the pre-election coalitions and the post-election coalitions. So for example—I have no idea how many parties Mr. Vucic has in his pre-election coalition at the moment—but there are at least four, five, six, or seven, others too. The SPS (Socialist Party of Serbia) [has] three. So it was going like that: too many. But this was the price of the '90s; this was the price that had to be paid if you wanted to get rid of the Milosevic regime. You had to assemble everybody. The DOS, Democratic Opposition of Serbia, that took over and was the first democratically elected government of Serbia was exactly the same story. You had trade unions in the government and you had all kinds of smaller and bigger parties. I would say the real trouble started not so much with Djindjic's government, but with the government of Kostunica where, in fact almost as a rule, the ministries were belonging to parties.*

For example, one of my major issues and problems was always the Ministry of Education. The Socialist Party was in charge of the Ministry of Education for the last six or seven years. The major decision makers in the ministry were from the same party. So, in a way, it became the property of one party. But this went on with others too. This is why some political analysts were talking about a unique type of feudalism where every ministry was a fief. This is of course detrimental. This is detrimental for any serious coordination and professionalization of the administration. As I already mentioned, it was a major problem for the prime minister and for SEIO as well because, since there were always these small majorities in the parliament: 127 of the ruling coalition, 123 on the other side or 126:124—they had one or two MPs who were in fact deciding whether the government is staying or falling. In that position the whole government is a hostage and small parties, not to talk about the bigger ones, but small parties can really play a very public game of blackmailing and taking much more power than they would have otherwise.

GAVRILIS: Sonja, what are some examples of challenges that the ministries, or various parts of the administration, created for the prime minister's office or for SEIO and how were these resolved?

LICHT: *You have the famous story of the G17plus (political party born out of an expert group) and Mladjan Dinkic. I'm sure it was already mentioned to you. He was one of those people who made, I think, two or three governments to fall. Then he would leave the government just before it falls and attack them as if they are guilty for everything that happened. Of course he paid a major price: he is out of politics. He disappeared as a political personality. But how much did it slow down the process and what was the harm made? It is very difficult to really know in exact figures.*

That was not the only one, but he was the paradigm of this kind of behavior: "If you don't do as I insist you do, I'm going to leave." And then the whole government is falling. So there is this insecurity, which then brings a lot of very serious problems. I don't want to say that everybody from his party was behaving

the same way, but it always depends on the boss. So probably that is the most well-known example.

Then of course you have, unfortunately, an ongoing tension between those who want to centralize and those who want to decentralize the country. Again, the question of decentralization—I don't know how often it was mentioned to you—in my opinion, is very important. I am not thinking only about the relationship between the national level of the Serbian government and Vojvodina because Vojvodina is the only region that is really a full-fledged region. All these other regions are created in an artificial way, for statistical purposes mainly so that they don't matter. You can't create regions. Regions are created both geographically and historically—it is again a bottom-up and top-down process. You can't make it only top-down because then it is not a region I think; it simply doesn't operate like that.

The problem is also subsidiarity because you have the same situation in Vojvodina. Politicians in Vojvodina very often like to say that “we are for decentralization” by definition. This is not true, because they in fact very often wanted to centralize only on another level—not on the level of the entire Serbia but on the level of Vojvodina with no real subsidiarity to the local self-governments, especially in financial terms. So that was also a problem which depended very much on the competing powers between the parties. I must say, everybody is attacking the previous prime minister [saying] that he was very weak.

I happen to believe that he also had a major problem: that he was not able, in a real way, to be a leader of the government. There was such an insufficient cooperation between the ministries that, from time to time, we had the feeling that this is an orchestra where everybody is playing a different tune. If they wouldn't have this outside controller who is, from time to time, checking whether they bought a ticket to ride, I don't know how it will end up. This is why so many people say that now there is a new chance—because at least you have a government with a great majority in the parliament and it will be able to push through things that the previous government was not able to do. By previous, I mean the one [in place up until] 2012.

Of course, on the other hand, this situation has its own dangers: a very weak opposition. It is nice that this government is pro-European and I hope it won't change. Mr. Vucic already made a major U-turn in his historical political career and he knows that he can't make two. If you make one U-turn, you can remain a politician. With two or more U-turns, you become a propeller; a fan on the ceiling and no one takes you seriously any longer.

GAVRILIS: I'm going to come back full circle to the beginning of our interview with what I am going to ask you now. You said that when the NPI was explained, the Bulgarian NPI, people realized “wow, this is huge, this is everything.”

LICHT: *Huge.*

GAVRILIS: We talked about state building—another indication that accession is really a complete makeover, a complete transformation.

LICHT: Yes.

GAVRILIS: Since Serbia is being asked to change everything for the sake of EU membership, my question is, did the 2008 or 2012 administrations have a way to prioritize how they were thinking about national development and this huge strategy?

LICHT: *That is an excellent question. I remember two moments about prioritization. One when I had my own discussion with Prime Minister Djindjic in 2001—one of my first discussions with him when he formed the government—and I asked him how did they define their priorities, and do they have them one, two, three? He said, “You don’t understand, we can’t do it. Everything is a priority because we inherited an impossible situation.” I remember my answer—which will sound to people who don’t know me maybe even too arrogant. I said, “Then I’m afraid you won’t do anything if you don’t have your priorities, clearly defined priorities.”*

GAVRILIS: Djindjic?

LICHT: *Yes. This was my conversation with Zoran Djindjic in 2001. Why am I mentioning it? It is not important in itself at all. It is important in my view because the approach to prioritize too many things continued. NPI was published in the form of a huge book. Mr. Djelic is so proud of this book. If it would fall on your leg, it would probably break your toe or something.*

There was a huge meeting in the Palace of Serbia, the former Palace of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in New Belgrade when NPI was launched. They asked Professor [Milhajlo] Crnobrnja from the Faculty of Finance and Administration to be the first commentator, one of our specialists on European integration, especially in economic terms, by the way, Professor Mihajlo Crnobrnja was also the last head of the diplomatic mission of the former Yugoslavia in Brussels. Before Yugoslavia fell apart, he was the head of the mission of Yugoslavia in Brussels, so he really has continuity and he has knowledge of this whole process. And he was, I think, the only one who was given the material before the government presented it.

GAVRILIS: They started working on it in 2006-2007; it was signed in 2008, I think.

LICHT: *Mihajlo Crnobrnja was asked as an independent expert to give his opinion. And I remember when he said, “fourteen priorities, it doesn’t work. People, you can have maximum four.” So, you see, there is a problem in prioritization.*

I must tell you, I’m afraid that on this topic, the commission is not too helpful because they are also prioritizing everything, because they also have their boxes and everybody is checking the box. I know it is difficult. Do you say that reform of the judiciary is more important than building infrastructure? [Asks interviewer who shrugs]. I know, but this is why you and I are not prime ministers or ministers. Excuse me; serious government must make very difficult choices. I am convinced that if there is no clear priority or list of priorities, then you are basically jumping from one stone to the other.

Of course, the accession process is something that is kind of streamlining this process, but I’m remembering those two moments I described to you. I remember I was sitting very close to Professor Crnobrnja and I was terribly happy that he came out with that. It was almost his first sentence: “if you have 14 different priorities, you don’t know how to focus”. Then again, every minister is focusing on his or her own thing. I don’t want to say that if we don’t put education among

these three or four priorities—even me, who thinks that education, should, in the developmental framework, be one of the most important—I would understand. I just insist that you must have clear priorities for a certain period of time.

Then you can check whether you are moving forward. Look, this is how the visa liberalization prioritization was so successful. We got the road map and all the benchmarks. It was possible to check from the beginning to the end whether the process is moving in the right direction with the right speed. In two years they did it—huge work. Giving over the border security from the military to the police is a major issue, and they managed to do it. That was a clear map and there was a clear award at the end of it.

I think that the accession process should be organized in a similar way as the roadmap for visa liberalization [was]. It is too long without real rewards or awards at the end of a certain period. This is why it is so difficult.

GAVRILIS: So in this very difficult political context—domestically difficult, externally difficult, where there is government after government, there's no ability to set priorities—how do institutions like SEIO manage to innovate and do good things? When I say innovate, it is to come up with solutions and to do things that aren't handed them from the outside.

LICHT: *I think it was a great moment when the units for European Integration were created in all ministries with good horizontal cooperation, with a good process of preparation of IPA projects, and with, from time to time, a good communication strategy. They managed, probably not enough, but they managed. Let me give you one example. I understand that it can also sound presumptuous. For years during Tanja's time and Milica's term, SEIO was organizing a conference once a year with us, the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, as a partner. These conferences were organized toward the end of the year or after the progress reports were issued we were discussing what has been achieved during the past year and what should be done in the time ahead. I thought this was a very innovative approach; not because they did it with us but because they understood that, since they have all these difficulties as you just named them, there is a civil society which is also a helpful hand in pushing through certain objectives.*

The same thing is true for their cooperation with the European movement. Look now at this European Convention on EU integration that we are starting again. That was already a project a few years ago which was called the European Convent or Convention, supported by the Slovak Aid because the Slovaks had that model of gathering various civil society organizations (CSO's) under one roof. Then [CSO's] were kind of supporting the government in their accelerated EU integration.

Now we are starting the Convention again. For every chapter that Serbia is negotiating with the European Commission, there is a group of CSOs, including think-tanks and academic institutions that will follow the negotiations. We are heading the one on energy. In each group, there will be 15 to 20 NGOs participants, sometimes even more. The idea is that we, as the representatives of the society in a broader sense build a support mechanism to the negotiations. It should also serve as a check and balance.

The difference to the Montenegrin practice, that included civil society into the negotiations themselves, we choose this model. We wouldn't [enter negotiations]

even if the government wanted to do it with us. We have to stay as an outside mechanism and, at the same time, support the process but be able to criticize it as well. Our strength is our independence.

GAVRILIS: Does the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society want civil societies to be part of the negotiation process?

LICHT: *No, no one here in Serbia wants to be a part of the negotiating process. We are just making a clear statement, because there were some ideas coming from the outside: "why don't you do it as the Montenegrins were." We said no. It is the role of the government and we are here to be a support mechanism, but also to be the watchdog for the whole process.*

GAVRILIS: Sonja, clarify something. This is part of the screening process? The working groups on screening processes?

LICHT: *Of course, we will also follow the screening but this is under the European Movement's (European Movement in Serbia) auspices. There is a secretariat that will coordinate all these different civil society organizations. Also, in all those groups, there are some professional organizations, including representatives of various trade unions and other interest groups. Everything under the heading of civil society is being represented. We are going to follow chapter by chapter how the screening is going and how the negotiations are going. Tanja Miscevic is terribly happy to have this whole bunch of support. We will see how it will operate.*

The idea is to, in fact, mobilize the entire civil society behind the process, but also to help the process. So this is where SEIO is great. When you ask about creativity, they understood that they have to look for very different allies, inside and outside. Now we'll see with this new government. For the first time, we have a situation that there is such a huge majority in the parliament and that the decision making process is much easier. The most important thing is to keep it democratic.

GAVRILIS: Sonja, thank you.

LICHT: *You're welcome. I'm too talkative.*

GAVRILIS: It's wonderful.