

# CAFÉ EUROPE

## The EU as a cohesive glue

Radmila Sekerinska and Macedonia's membership application

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Radmila Sekerinska. Photo: pre tv

**During Radmila Sekerinska's tenure as deputy prime minister for European integration from 2002 to 2006, Macedonia transitioned from a country on the brink of civil war to an official candidate for EU membership. She represents a new generation of Southeast European politicians whose values differ radically from those who led the Yugoslav successor states into war and abyss in the 1990s.**

**R**admila Sekerinska was born in Skopje in 1972, the daughter of two electrical engineers.

*"My generation had a very formal upbringing, quiet, calm and predictable. We were not aware of the political problems, there was very little discussion about politics, and somehow the decisions had already been made elsewhere. Some people have had problems in former*

*Yugoslavia and some families were really victims of that regime, but the majority of the people lived a kind of quiet provincial life."*

The possibility of travel through Europe as a child evokes fond memories. Sekerinska believes these journeys were essential to her personal development.

*"[Our parents] would put us, me and my younger sister, into our Zastava 101, a terrible, old car, with basic camping equipment, and then we would just go to Slovenia and at the border we would decide whether we'd take 10 days in Italy or in central Europe. This gave me a feeling of limitless possibilities, even to me as a child. And I think it did broaden my horizons and raise my ambitions. I was not used to going to hotels, I very rarely travelled by plane, but even the car and the train did well in making me see myself as a citizen of Europe. I never had this feeling when I was young that we were elsewhere. It was always this European way of upbringing, European values, European movies, and European books."*

Sekerinska belongs to the generation whose "quiet, calm and predictable" childhood came to an end in the 1980s. As the Yugoslav federation dissolved, Croatia and later Bosnia and Herzegovina descended into war. Aggressive nationalism dominated the political scene, particularly in Serbia and Croatia, but nationalism was also on the rise in Macedonia.

*"There were enough politicians to come up with the Milosevic recipe. And they were always the loudest and the strongest and they appealed to many frightened citizens that this is how you can save your country. So, at the beginning of the 1990s, we had a surge of nationalism both among ethnic Macedonians and among ethnic Albanians. And it felt that if you were not in one of these two clubs, you were a traitor. This is when I became very, very interested in politics. I had watched a few years earlier what was happening in Serbia and suddenly I felt that more or less the same kind of prescription was given by some politicians to Macedonia. I resented that surge of violence and nationalism and primitivism in politics. And although I was studying a completely non-political subject – engineering – I actually felt the urge to do something to reverse the trend, at least to be vocal about my severely different opinion."*

In 1992, as a young student in Skopje, Sekerinska joined the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). During the first few years, she helped campaign, deliver promotional material, and carry out

organizational work. In 1994, an important election year, she became responsible for communication with foreign journalists. After a stay of a few months in Germany, she was nominated for a seat on a local assembly in Skopje. In 1997, she became party spokesperson, a move which Sekerinska herself sees as the turning point in becoming a professional politician. Constantly exposed to media, she became publicly known and won a seat in parliament in 1998.

During her time as an opposition MP, Macedonia came close to civil war. Violent confrontations between Albanian rebels led by Ali Ahmeti and Macedonian security forces erupted in spring 2001.

*“You would presume that there would have been panic but actually there was not, because there was this feeling that somehow problems would disappear, that they would last for a week and that they were far away. And I have compared this attitude among the majority of Macedonian citizens with the events in Croatia and Bosnia, and I actually saw that this is a typical pattern: people adjust to the conflict and think that somehow it will not affect their daily lives. We thought, ‘Oh, this is just the neighbourhood of Kosovo,’ and this is why the problems have erupted.*

*When [the conflict] moved to Tetovo, which is 40 km from Skopje, we thought that somehow the conflict was still contained, that there were problems, there was shooting ... but that it would go away. It moved closer and closer to Skopje. It was in Arachinovo, which is halfway between Skopje and the airport, and people were still leaving on vacation to Greece or to Ohrid. I think it was pretty dangerous, because it made everyone numb.”*

While tensions continued and Arachinovo was being bombed, the parties were already negotiating in secret.

*“Everyone wanted to see the hostilities end, but no one was prepared to pay the political price for this. Politicians could stick to the line that ‘We are not negotiating with the insurgents or the terrorists or the fighters’. Some people thought that just by sitting down and negotiating – four political parties and the president – we were already committing treason.”*

The negotiations lasted until August 2001, when the Ohrid Agreement brought hostilities to an end. After the collapse of the all-party coalition government which had been set-up during the crisis, the Social Democrats won the autumn 2002 elections – and thus were left with the task of implementing the agreement.

Sekerinska became deputy prime minister for European integration. She oversaw important progress on Macedonia's path towards EU accession. Under her leadership, in March 2004, Macedonia applied for membership and – in December 2005 – was awarded official EU candidate status by the European Council.

*“I personally witnessed the change that has occurred in Macedonia from 2001 to 2003. A country which nobody expected to survive managed to show that with good policies, with more understanding, with better discussions, with more tolerance, peace can be restored and confidence can be rebuilt. I have always been a strong believer that the EU glue is the element of cohesion that countries like Macedonia desperately need, not only because of ethnic divides but also because of social divides. So, if there was one umbrella policy that could help us to change the country, it was definitely the prospect of EU membership.”*

Several key individuals in the government and late president Boris Trajkovski shared that vision. But it proved to be a significant challenge, first to convince the domestic audience, media and voters, and second to convince the EU.

Sekerinska understood that, regardless of the many requirements set out by the EU, the Ohrid Agreement would serve as the crucial indicator of progress. The implementation of the agreement required not only an end to hostilities, but also more minority rights, including equitable representation of all national groups in the state administration. While this was difficult, as it meant that ethnic Macedonians had to give up their economic privileges, Sekerinska also saw it as an opportunity.

*“When politicians and experts read the Ohrid agreement, they said: ‘Oh my god, this would be difficult to implement even in a richer, stronger and more mature country. And it is difficult to do it in few years.’ So they said: ‘OK, if you do at least this, then you’ll show that Macedonia can actually progress in the future.’ And we took it for granted and we said: ‘OK, if it’s the Ohrid Agreement [that counts] then so be it.’ We were aware that Macedonia would not be a perfect candidate country in a few years, but the Ohrid Agreement was the big argument in our favour because it became clear in 2005 that Macedonia has implemented the most difficult parts of the Ohrid Agreement against all odds and against all predictions.”*

Progress on the EU integration path did not come easy, however. Sekerinska was surprised by the reaction of some member states to Skopje's plan to apply for EU membership.

*"We had a few delegations from Berlin and from Paris sending a very clear message: we think it's too early, and if you do it, it will be your risk. It wasn't nice wording. It was very direct. And I cannot say it didn't frighten us. We've had several meetings afterwards, the small cabinet and president Trajkovski: Are we on the right track? Can we afford to go against the main stream European tide? It was a huge dilemma ...*

*We sat down and we said, look: if we can implement the basic part of the Ohrid Agreement by 2005, we have a wild card. And we'll go to the same people who thought that this was impossible and we will tell them that yes, in the Balkans a multiethnic country with a conflict history can dramatically change into a normal European place and this is what should earn us candidate status."*

The leadership in Skopje disregarded the cautionary advice of Berlin and Paris and applied for membership on 22 March 2004. This courageous decision paid off: on 1 October, Romano Prodi, then-president of the European Commission, personally delivered an EC questionnaire to Skopje. Such questionnaires allow the EU to evaluate the credentials of applicant countries. Preparing the answers was a big challenge for the Macedonian administration, whose capacity, Sekerinska concedes, was weak.

*"The questionnaire is an x-ray. It asks basic and sophisticated questions about the country, its structure, its laws, its problems, its people, its statistics, everything. But it is not a solely technical exercise. It makes you see your weaknesses and to come up with your view on how to fix them. So, it's diagnosis and cure ... a combination of fact finding, political planning and strategy."*

Eventually, the answers comprised 4,000 pages and another 10,000 pages of supporting material.

*"It was a soul-searching process. It's like when you go to a doctor or psychiatrist and then they start asking you questions, and just by talking you come closer to the solution to your problems. This exercise exposed all the problems that Macedonia has swept under the carpet for some time because they were not very popular to deal with. It made us think through all of these issues. Secondly, I think it gave the*

*administration not only the test of resilience but also the gratification that if they perform well, something good can come out of it ...*

*I don't know whether it was three or four thousand people that worked all together, but the number was really big. Every question had several people in charge and the responsibility was personal, it was not just the anonymous ministry or the anonymous civil servant from ministry X. It was a person with a name and a background and they felt that they are part of an important puzzle, that they are not anonymous and that their effort will be visible. So at the end there was a strong team spirit among people who didn't know each other, but who communicated all the time via Internet, email and telephone."*

SDSM lost the parliamentary elections of 2006. Sekerinska took over the presidency of her party for a time, but resigned after a clear electoral defeat in the early parliamentary elections of June 2008. She is now the chairperson of the National European Integration Council, a body created in 2007 with the aim of improving internal consensus on issues related to EU accession negotiations. It gathers all parties represented in parliament, representatives of the executive, local governments, Macedonia's religious communities, trade unions, chambers of commerce and other civil groups. However, the council has not yet been able to embark on its main task. Despite the recommendation by the European Commission to open accession negotiations, Greece blocks this decision because of a dispute about Macedonia's official name.

*"I feel disappointed by the fact that it's 2010 and Macedonia hasn't even received a negotiating date ... But on the other side, I am relieved and I am really happy and satisfied that we earned candidate status in 2005, making some things irreversible ... This candidate status, which was earned with lots of hard work, dedication and political sacrifice, was a safety net that preserved Macedonia from falling really, really down." ■*