

Presentation of EuroNatur Award 2017

Island of Mainau/Lake Constance at 11 October 2017

Acceptance speech of award winner Gudrun Steinacker

Dear Earl Bernadotte, dear president Schroeder, dear professor Knapp, dear ladies and gentlemen,

I've been holding many speeches in my professional life, in different languages. However, hardly any speech has been so difficult for me like this one today. Of course, I'm very grateful to be honoured by receiving this award which is so important for nature conservation. But actually I do not deserve it. I'm not really a nature conservationist. My knowledge about flora and fauna is very limited.

I always loved nature, like many people do, in a romantic sense, as a peaceful place for recreation. Also, for a long time already, I gave attention, in an entirely unprofessional way, to issues of nature destruction. My career as a diplomat gave me the opportunity to support nature conservation projects, for example in Bulgaria and Russia. I am convinced for a long time already that in those former communist countries, where I spent most of my professional life, the much-trumpeted civil society can be found particularly in environmental and nature conservation. I witnessed to my dismay that after the end of communism, which often destroyed nature and the environment for ideological reasons, the elites of the transition countries destroy nature deliberately and also maliciously in these times of real-life capitalism, mostly for the sake of short-time profit. However, this doesn't make me a nature conservationist.

My dedication to the protection of the saline in Ulcinj – or Ulqin in Albanian – is not sufficient to merit this important award. Others did a lot more to save the saline from destruction. And it is still uncertain, if it can be saved.

When speaking about the preservation of the saline, first of all we have to remember Dr. Schneider-Jacoby. He dedicated the last years of his life to this task with great intensity. His name still resounded throughout the land when I came to Montenegro in 2014. I learned to know Martin Schneider-Jacoby in 1986 in Zagreb and I admired his work to save the Sava floodplains. Unfortunately, we lost sight of each other after this. I was the more shocked

when upon my arrival in Podgorica I had to learn that he, who had worked tirelessly for nature conservation on the Balkans and particularly in Montenegro, had passed away one and a half years before, much too early. His friends in Montenegro, in particular the bird conservation organisation CZIP, told me a lot about all that he did for the country. CZIP, the mostly young bird conservationists in Montenegro, and especially Darko Saveljić, a good friend of Martin Schneider-Jacoby, are fighting for years to save the saline, this unique biodiversity hotspot. Therefore, Darko and CZIP president Jovana Janjušević, on behalf of all CZIP members, merit the award at least as much as I do. And I absolutely have to mention Zenepa Lika from Ulcinj, president of the Dr. Martin Schneider-Jacoby Society, whose enthusiasm for the unique nature of Ulcinj, not only the saline, but also Ada Bojana, the long beach and Valdanos, caught me. I also want to express my thanks to the young politician Dritan Abazović, president of opposition party URA. Without Dritan, we wouldn't know about the documents that prove how the saline was driven into bankruptcy in a criminal way.

Together with my colleagues Grazyna Sikorska from Poland and Veronique Brumeaux from France, I visited the saline for the first time in October 2014 at the invitation of CZIP. There I learned about the imminent threats following the fraudulent bankruptcy and the end of salt production. Within the so-called Weimar Triangle cooperation, we obtained the approval by our governments to publicly intervene with the Montenegrin government and to call for protection of the saline. Therefore I want to give my thanks also to Grazyna and Veronique. At the first of three saline conservation conferences that CZIP organised in 2015, 2016 and 2017, supported by EuroNatur, but also BirdLife International, the Ramsar Secretariat, CEPF and others, I got into contact with Gabriel Schwaderer and other members of EuroNatur who did and do their utmost for many years to save the saline from foreseeable destruction. Until today, the agreement to save the saline, which was signed by the Minister of Sustainable Development and Tourism in 2015, has not been implemented.

We, me personally too, received a lot of support and encouragement from the population, but also from politicians and high-level officials up to ministers and state secretaries – not publicly from the latter, of course. That they were asking me to save the saline, tells a lot about the political constellations in this EU candidate country.

Not only CZIP, but also MANS, the probably most important anti-corruption organisation in Montenegro, greatly supported us. Their profound analyses

provided evidence for the many fraudulent privatisations since the political shift in Montenegro, including the attempt to privatise the saline area, 1500 hectares, for the benefit of the country's most influential family.

Media supported us and provided a forum to counter the government's propaganda. My special thanks go to Milka Tadić-Mijović and her colleagues at the TV station Vijesti which broadcasted a documentary on the criminal manipulations relating to the saline only three weeks ago. We hope that this film will also be presented in Germany and other countries.

There's little doubt that the family of the still mightiest man of Montenegro, former prime minister and president of the party in power (for more than 30 years), Milo Đukanović, wants to take possession of this vast area at the Adriatic Sea on the cheap. Nature as the most important resource of this small country is probably the last thing that these people and their friends are interested in. New York based professor Branko Milanović, one of the most renowned inequality specialist, explicitly refers to Đukanović when he calls such regimes illiberal democracies and clientelist kleptocracies, where the man on the top grabs the biggest piece of the cake, but in the first instance governs who gets which part of the cake. "Thus the party in power is simply organised theft."

Given these circumstances, it has been a major success to gain support by the representative of the EU Commission then responsible for Montenegro, by the head of the EU delegation to Podgorica, and by Members of the European Parliament. Thank you very much, Dirk Lange, Mitja Drobnič und MEP Terry Reintke, standing also for other MEPS.

We thought that the call to protect the saline within the yearly reports on Montenegro by the EU Commission and the subsequent resolutions by the European Parliament in 2015, 2016 and 2017 would be the breakthrough. Unfortunately this was not the case! Less than four weeks ago, a study financed by the EU on the conservation of Ulcinj Salina has been published. The study emphasises the saline's outstanding importance for biodiversity and recommends as the preferred scenario to resume salt production and to develop ecotourism. However, the competent Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism repeatedly stated that an economic and financial feasibility assessment would be needed.

The EU is weak. Brussels seems to be more interested in the beautiful image than in the ugly reality on the Balkans. It's incomprehensible that the EU

Commission allegedly ensured the Montenegrin government in early April to open Chapter 27 of the so-called EU Acquis, which concerns environmental and nature conservation and calls for a sustainable development of the country, before the end of this year – although they know that this will be interpreted and propagandised by the government and the ruling elites as a success and reward for would-be progress. The Ulcinj Salina case is no obstacle, stated the Montenegrin Minister for Europe.

Three days ago, I heard the prime minister of Montenegro say on the Austrian radio that he expects all remaining chapters of the 36 Acquis chapters for EU accession to be opened this year. Brussels knows that Montenegro did not approximate its standards to those of the EU, but moved away from them. Progress exists almost exclusively on paper. This is particularly true for the issues covered by Chapter 27, as well as for the development of the rule of law, which a long-term western consultant called a black hole. Never before have environment and nature, the most important resource of this small country, been more threatened than today. What makes the EU institutions invent for themselves a virtual reality of Montenegro – and the Balkans in general – irrespective of the facts?

While the EU Acquis calls for sustainable development, the administration in Brussels is only concerned with increasing the member states' wealth by growth, trade and change. But this system isn't working any more for a long time already!! Inequality is increasing within all our countries and too many people, especially in the new member states are too far away from wealth. Neoliberal capitalism aims at pushing back the state in favour of private property, as Wolfgang Streeck, one of the most severe German critics of neoliberalism, points out in his contribution to the book "The Great Regression".

"There is no alternative" is the new credo. The EU devoted body and soul to this faith, as President of the European Commission Juncker recently proved both with his five scenarios for the EU's future and his proposals for the enlargement of the Euro and the EU.

The dilemma of sustainable nature conservation versus ruthless capitalisation of nature is also shown by the recent British, EU-financed study PAENCE, Protected Areas and the Expansion of Neoliberal Capitalism in Europe.

What does all of this have to do with Ulcinj Salina? It is a classic example for the ruling circumstances that the saline is being continuously degraded, despite

all assurances by the Montenegrin government and despite its acknowledged importance for biodiversity, which has once again been confirmed by the study mentioned earlier. The government in Podgorica claims that renewing salt production in the saline, combined with ecotourism, would be too costly and not profitable – after salt production and incipient ecotourism have been systematically destroyed, and we know by whom.

At the same time, the saline could serve as a perfect example for how economic activity, job creation, sustainable production of one of the oldest products of mankind – salt –, and nature conservation could go hand in hand. Martin Schneider-Jacoby proved this more than ten years ago.

I'm convinced that there's always an alternative. This view is shared by the economists Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen in their very recent publication „Imperiale Lebensweise. Zur Ausbeutung von Mensch und Natur im Globalen Kapitalismus“ (“Imperial way of living. On the exploitation of man and nature in global capitalism”). Every single attempt to demonstrate and realize alternatives is important, the authors state. Living in solidarity is not utopia.

Therefore I call on all of you, who gathered today: Please help save Ulcinj Salina, renew salt production and set an example by ecotourism, for the people of Ulcinj, for the people of Montenegro and of the Balkans, but also for us.