

Presentation of EuroNatur Award 2017

Island of Mainau/Lake Constance at 11 October 2017

Speech of EuroNatur President Christel Schroeder

Today we gathered to give the EuroNatur Award to Gudrun Steinacker, honouring her longstanding, strong personal efforts for preserving the European natural heritage particularly in South-Eastern Europe.

Our foundation is carrying out nature conservation projects on the Balkans ever since its early days. Nature conservation is a political issue, not only because it is subject to decisions by governments, but notably also because of its relevance to people's everyday lives and economic activities. Our approach is a transnational one – we don't believe in national thinking which is now on the rise again. Local partners enable us to gain insight into how people are living in our project regions. Regarding exploitation and depletion of natural resources, we note that our struggle is their struggle too.

Currently we see aggressive conflicts going on in South-Eastern Europe about how to use the natural heritage. We cannot understand these conflicts without taking into consideration recent historic developments. In our case today I would like to address the Western Balkan countries. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had its roots in resistance groups during World War II and persisted for almost fifty years since then. It was a peaceful union of Southern Slavic Peoples und provided for a modest wealth, fairly good educational opportunities and general health care. While there were social problems, increasing unemployment, economic divides between constituent republics and moreover a pervasive intelligence service, the well-established coexistence of religions and cultural traditions endured and provided existential security.

In stark contrast, the system change at the end of the past century was accompanied by years of violence. The struggle for independence of national states was partly shaped by ruthless takeover of power, even at the cost of war. During the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, shooting and looting was reasoned by 19th century phantasies of exclusion which had already then brought suffering and disaster to the people. These were ideas of ethnic and religious exclusiveness, filled with hatred and connected to cynical terms such as cleansing.

The wars brought death and displacement. And they destroyed the reliable structures of social life. A legal vacuum formed that enabled criminal elements to carry out their business without having to fear prosecution. Democratic structures lagged behind. The system change was abused by former officials, domestic and foreign managers, banks and investors to accumulate economic power through the sale of public properties.

Throughout South-Eastern Europe, system change entailed a dramatic imbalance between a small extremely rich class, a dwindling middle class and a steadily growing class of the poor. This general pattern varies in intensity between countries. Political power is used to safeguard ownership. Of course this raises the question: “How could this happen, if there were free elections?” The answer to this question points to the dramatic lack of independent media, to jurisdiction influenced by power cartels, manipulation of election results e.g. by faking electoral registers, and widespread corruption throughout all sectors. A vigilant civil society which might form a strong counterbalance to the abuse of power is still in its early stages.

However, this is where we see the leverage for our work: We cooperate with local groups to form a powerful, transnationally thinking civil society, which has the ability to offer resistance against the destruction of natural heritage. Our network, which sheds light on shady deals, may already be the first step of successful resistance.

Efforts to protect the natural heritage in South-Eastern Europe are subject to a dramatic race against time. Investments lacking social responsibility and backed by international banks grab natural treasures and leave large-scale destruction. While those nature exploiters operate transnationally, too, we note that “re-nationalisation” is used as a battle cry to legitimate exploitation in times of growing nationalism.

At first, lots of money was made in the Balkans by selling off public properties. Now it's the landscape which is being sold off over the heads of the people living there. Mostly, these are huge projects, which promise large profits and may at times also be used for money laundering. There is generally no participation of the local population. Domestic and foreign large investors secure the rights to exploit the landscape, a process which often involves corruption. One major example are the countless hydropower dam projects, threatening whole stream networks which until today have a high degree of natural integrity. The projects don't even stop at established national parks.

Politicians often play with hidden cards, because the procedures in the licensing poker hide away from the public eye.

One current hotspot of such activities is Ulcinj Salina in Montenegro. This area was once a lagoon open to the Adriatic Sea. About 100 years ago it was made into a saline, the largest of the eastern Adriatic coast. It covered 60% of salt demands in former Yugoslavia and counted more than 600 employees. Along with this sustainable use, large parts of the 1500 hectares remained to be near-natural wetland and mudflats. Salina Ulcinj is among the most important breeding, resting and wintering areas along the eastern Adriatic coast and has pan-European significance. On their way from Europe to Africa and back, every year millions of birds pass through this extensive wetland area.

In the meantime, the tourism industry cast a wishful eye on the area, and, as usual, the intentions involve large-scale building development. The Montenegrin government privatised the saline. Now the saline is out of operation for four years already. The government is delaying the decision to grant protected area status to the saline. It is hiding behind politics of symbols and announcements – a typical pattern which doesn't bode well.

By giving this year's nature conservation award to Gudrun Steinacker, EuroNatur wants to send a strong signal against the destruction of Ulcinj Salina. In her time as the German ambassador to Montenegro, Mrs. Steinacker advocated preserving the saline as an oasis of nature in an exemplary way. She proved that the diplomatic service may and must drop its neutral position, if there are illegalities going on.

Dear Mrs. Steinacker, we admire your straightforwardness, your courage, and your wisdom sharpened by experience. We feel honoured to be able to decorate you today.