

## Ljiljana Biukovic Ph.D. '00

By Joe Wiebe

## Breaking down borders through international trade law



When Ljiljana Biukovic was studying law in her native Yugoslavia in the mid-1980s, Europe was a far different place than it is now. The tensions of the Cold War weighed on everyone's minds, the USSR exerted great influence behind the so-called Iron Curtain, and the contemporary notion of a European Union where goods and people travel freely across most of the continent's borders was still years in the future.

Although it was a socialist country, Biukovic says Yugoslavia was a very interesting place to live at the time and very different from what many outsiders thought. The country "wasn't really a part of any bloc behind the Iron Curtain," she explains, pointing out that "it was actually one of the three founders of the Non-Aligned Movement," the goal of which was to neutralize the brinkmanship of the Cold War.

"Just to illustrate how different we were," Biukovic elaborates, "we really didn't need a visa to travel to any country at all until probably the beginning of the civil war [in the 1990s]. Or if there was a visa requirement, we would have just got that visa at the airport or at the consulate within a day."

"During our studies we could go for exchange programs at other European schools where we were exposed to ideas of liberalism, democracy and multi-party systems," she says.

Freedom to travel, however, was not necessarily balanced with similar freedoms at home.

"The law was very differently conceived in theory and practice at that time. In practice we had a system of self-management of publicly owned companies that basically minimized the rule of law in society. So it was a strange mixture."

When she received her LL.B. from the University of Belgrade in 1986, Biukovic's interest was international trade law, but because of the restrictive political situation at the time, she was not able to practice in that area.

"In order to work in certain institutions," she explains, "you needed to be politically correct and be a member of the party." Instead of practicing law, Biukovic found work as a journalist.

"I started with investigative reporting and then as the political situation became more complex, my horizon shrank and I ended

up writing more about culture because that was always an opportunity to say many other things and not be watched that much."

But later, when the situation changed and Yugoslavia began democratizing, Biukovic got a job as a lawyer working for an agency that was dealing with international trade, what she always wanted to do.

From her perspective looking back now, she says it was an exciting time in Europe.

"European communities were trying to build an ever closer union and thinking of completely removing borders. They already had one internal market, but reaching the moment where you could travel and not actually be stopped at the border on a train."

"I started to wonder," she reminisces, "how would it feel to be a part of something like that, a much wider scene. I was quite fascinated by it."

Biukovic continued living and working in Belgrade into the early 1990s, pursuing her interests by travelling and studying. But as Yugoslavia began to disintegrate, she says, "I already knew that I would leave. I was in London, actually, when war broke out in Croatia."

In 1994, she received a George Soros Scholarship to pursue her LL.M. with a focus on comparative business law at the Central European University in Budapest. As she considered moving further into her specialization, one of her mentors there suggested she should consider studying at UBC.

"I didn't come here by mere chance, looking at *National Geographic* and thinking, 'Well, this is a wonderful place,' " she says with a chuckle. She was particularly attracted by the idea of studying under and working with Professor Robert Paterson and Henri Alvarez of Fasken Matineau, both experts in commercial arbitration.

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There were other good reasons, too: "Canada had common law and civil law jurisdictions and a federal state. The US was there and NAFTA, so I thought this was really good momentum for me to study what I really want, if they want me. And they were positive."

Biukovic obtained her LL.M. (1995) and Ph.D. (2000) from UBC and also began teaching in specialties.

"One of the areas that I thought I could contribute to the curriculum was European Union law," she says. "Around that time the idea of founding an Institute for European Studies at UBC had emerged and I got connected with people who were spearheading this."

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Her working relationship with the Institute for European Studies at UBC continues to this day – she developed and teaches a seminar on External Relations of the European Union for the Institute and the Faculty of Law. She also supervises graduate students and has taken students on European study tours, presented by the Network for European Studies with the support from the European Commission.

“This year for the first time, the Director of the tour helped us to open up two internship positions with the European Court of Justice for law students. That’s very, very special.”

Biukovic is very excited about negotiations taking place between Canada and the European Union. “They’re negotiating something

that’s going to be very interesting – economic and partnership agreements that could potentially be broader and deeper than NAFTA.”

With that in mind, it seems Biukovic made the right decision coming to UBC. She agrees – while she does visit Belgrade often, she says Vancouver is her home now.

“I have all the benefits of the place that I could think of in terms of my own research and my work, and I like working with students. You usually get good students and it’s a pleasure to work with smart people and to stay in touch with some of them. And some of them really want to do more international trade, which makes me very happy. UBC is a vibrant place and for what I do it’s quite exciting.” ●