

»I'VE ALWAYS FELT THAT MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS ARISE WHEN YOU TRULY RESPECT AND UNDERSTAND THE PEOPLE YOU'RE WORKING WITH.« **VESNA HODNIK NIKOLIĆ, CONSULTANT, WIRTSCHAFTSKAMMER KÄRNTEN (ECONOMIC CHAMBER OF CARINTHIA), AUSTRIA, EMBA 2007-08**

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*Interviewed by Vera Pasyukova,
photos: WKK and IEDC*

Your career path spans across HR, marketing, cross-border cooperation, and EU projects. What have been the pivotal moments or decisions that shaped this diverse trajectory?

Throughout my career, it has been a mix of conscious choices and unexpected challenges that shaped my path. Moving from marketing to HR and later into international cooperation came from a

desire to broaden my horizons and build connections across borders. The pivotal moments were those when I embraced change and stepped out of my comfort zone — like accepting roles that combined different disciplines or moving to Austria.

You've played a key role in building bridges between Slovenia and Austria through economic networks. What are some of the most impactful projects you've been involved

in, and what made them successful?

Over the past seven years, I've been deeply engaged in the economic chamber network, and this has been an incredibly rewarding chapter of my career. At the Slovenian Economic Association in Carinthia (SGZ), I had the opportunity to lead two successful EU cross-border projects within the Interreg program focusing on SME's. These initiatives strengthened connections between Slovenian and Austrian

entrepreneurs and laid the groundwork for long-term cooperation.

Today, at the Carinthian Economic Chamber — the main chamber of commerce in Austria — I have a broader role that allows me to access a wider range of EU perspectives and opportunities, and to play a more active role in shaping international collaborations. As the coordinator of the New Alpe Adria Network (NAAN), I work with ten chambers across the Alpe-Adria region, and I help organize cross-border meetings that enable entrepreneurs to connect, share ideas, create EU projects and find new partners.

In your current work with the Wirtschaftskammer Kärnten, what are the main challenges and opportunities you see for businesses in cross-border regions like Alpe-Adria?

One of the greatest opportunities lies in strengthening our voice and visibility as a macroregion through coordinated collaboration. The New Alpe Adria Network of Chambers (NAAN), which unites ten chambers from four countries, represents around 850,000 enterprises across a market of nearly 9 million people. By joining forces, we can more

effectively promote economic cooperation, innovation, and integration across the Alpe-Adria region.

At the same time, we face shared structural challenges. Demographic shifts — such as aging populations and the shortage of skilled professionals — demand new strategies to attract and retain talent. Infrastructural development is another key area requiring joint action. Efficient and sustainable connectivity is critical, especially with five strategically important ports — Koper, Trieste, Rijeka, Venice, and Pula — serving as gateways to international trade. The

Alpe-Adria macroregion as a competitive and forward-looking space within Europe.

How do you approach stakeholder engagement across different cultural and institutional contexts in your international work?

I've always felt that meaningful connections arise when you truly respect and understand the people you're working with. In my role, I've learned to listen first — to understand where others are coming from, their priorities, and their ways of doing things. Coming from Slovenia and working in Austria, I've lived



modernization of key transport corridors, including the TEN-T Core Network and the upcoming Koralm Railway linking Graz and Klagenfurt, will significantly enhance regional mobility and market access. Projects like AREA SÜD are already transforming Carinthia into a dynamic innovation and business hub.

By acting together and addressing these common challenges, we can foster resilience, unlock economic potential, and position the

this cultural and institutional interplay every day, and it has shaped how I build trust across borders.

For me, it's about finding common ground and focusing on shared interests, while adapting my communication and approach to fit different environments. I've found that this open, respectful, and collaborative mindset is the best way to create lasting relationships — whether across the table or across the



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really inspires me every day.

Looking back, how did your Executive MBA at IEDC influence your career or leadership style? Would you recall why did you decide to pursue an EMBA at IEDC, how did you like the studies? Do you still keep in touch with anyone from your generation or other IEDC connections?

The EMBA at IEDC was truly an amazing experience for me. At the time, I was with Adecco Slovenia and felt my career was on a solid path, but it was a conversation with a friend who was at the time studying at IEDC that got me very curious. I still remember that drive to Nassfeld after one of his modules — he spoke with such a passion and energy about the program that I suddenly began imagining myself there too. It felt like an invitation to grow, to broaden my horizons, and to take the next bold step in my own journey.

border.

Throughout my own experience, I've learned how important it is to listen actively, stay flexible, and adapt to different cultures and ways of doing things. But above all, I've found that resilience and integrity make the biggest difference. They help build trust, deepen connections, and transform cooperation into long term, meaningful partnerships.

Having worked in leadership positions in both private companies and public institutions, how do you define effective leadership in a cross-sector context?

For me, effective leadership in a cross-sector and international context is about hard work, resilience, and leading by example — especially when working in a different language and culture. Moving to Austria and learning to lead in German was a challenge, and it taught me how important it is to listen, adapt, and stay open-minded.

You've led both strategic and operational initiatives. How do you stay grounded while managing complexity

and long-term impact goals?

To be honest, I don't really see my work as complex in that sense. It's more about project management — and EU projects have a very structured, creative nature. The challenge is mostly at the beginning: recognizing opportunities, crafting a strong project, and making sure it's well positioned. Once the project is approved, the execution is clearly defined, and it's all about following through.

For me, it's not about managing "complexity" but about keeping my eyes open, seeing opportunities, and bringing the right people together. The last seven years have felt like a dream job — combining structure, creativity, and a sense of purpose that

Living close to the school, I always considered it a privilege to be able to study there — especially under the inspiring leadership and example of Prof. Danica Purg. The EMBA didn't just give me new knowledge and a strong network (with some colleagues I'm still in personal contact), it also gave me a deeper



understanding of myself. It “messed with my brain” in the best possible way, making me rethink where I was headed and what I wanted to be.

Looking back, it was a real turning point for me — it shaped the way I approach both my career and my life. I’ve made some missteps along the way and crossed paths with the wrong people in management, but those moments taught me as much as any success ever could. And honestly, if I had the chance, I’d do the MBA all over again — especially now, with the experience and perspective I’ve gained.

What advice would you give to young professionals—especially women—interested in building international careers or entering the world of cross-border cooperation and EU projects?

My biggest piece of advice is to have “MUT” — the German word for courage. It’s about having the strength to step out of your comfort zone, to trust yourself, and to pursue opportunities even when the path isn’t fully clear. Above all, follow your dream and be prepared to work hard — it truly pays off. Today, women

are finding more and more spaces to thrive — particularly in innovation and the startup world. Gender equality is making progress — slowly, but surely — and every step you take to assert yourself can help open the door for others. So be bold, stay true to your values, and never forget that your voice and contribution matter.

We are currently preparing a new transnational project focused on empowering women through green and digital skills development across Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Germany, and France.

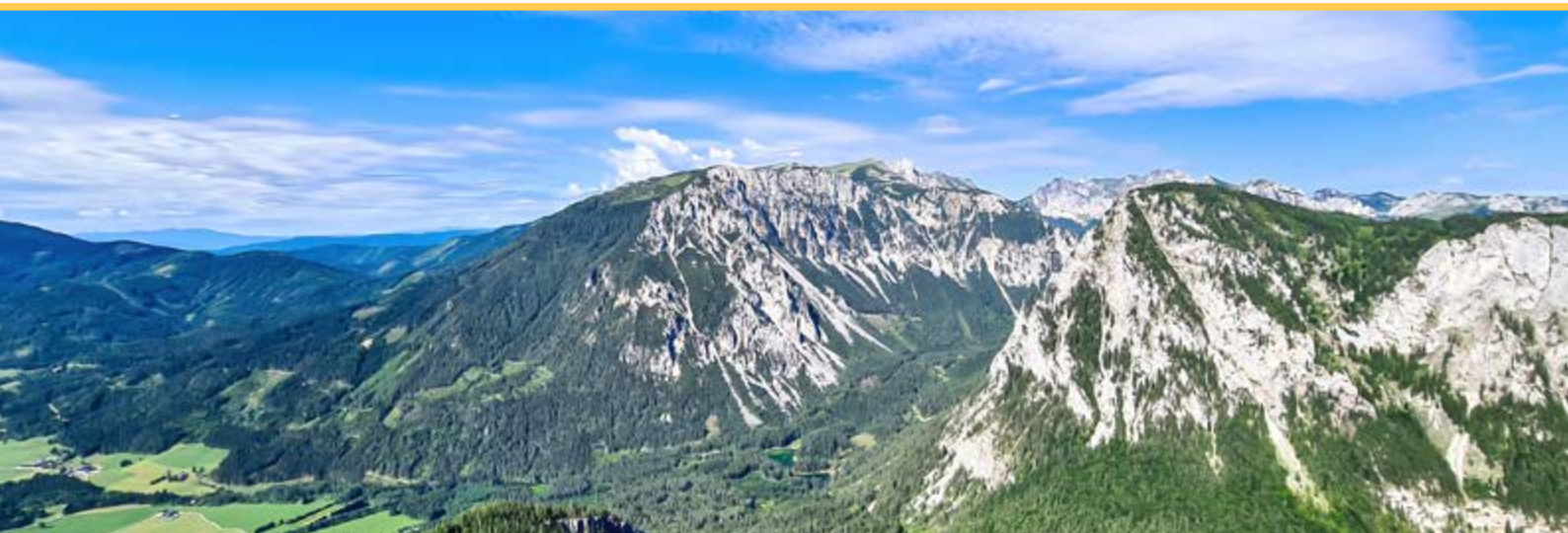
Originally coming from Bohinj, you have been living in Austria, in Celovec (Klagenfurt) since 2013 together with your family. Why did you make the move? Was it an easy move for you and your family? What’s your household language at home with your two wonderful children?

My husband was invited to a two-year project in Austria, and at the time I was pregnant with our first child. It felt like a great opportunity — a chance to experience life across the border, still close enough

to family in Slovenia. We initially thought it might be a short-term adventure, but after the birth of our second child, we began to recognize all the benefits of life in Klagenfurt – Carinthia.

With about 110,000 inhabitants, it’s not too big, yet big enough to offer a rich quality of life — a balance between living in nature and being well connected to the world, which is especially important for my husband, who travels internationally for work. It’s an ideal environment for raising children: safe, open, and green, with space to grow and thrive.

For me, it meant learning German from scratch — which was challenging, especially as many English-language roles here are highly technical and didn’t fit my background. But over time, I found ways to build my career and integrate fully. Today, our children are fully bilingual in Slovenian and German, and they’re already learning Italian and English as well. For them, mixing languages is a joy and an opportunity, not an obstacle — it’s simply a natural part of their world.



WHAT ONE CANNOT FIND ON VESNA'S RESUME



EMBA 2007 - 08

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What does a typical morning look like for you—any must-have rituals to start the day right?

Mornings for me are a race against the clock — I use every last minute for sleeping! I've tried it all: the 5 am club, the 7 minute morning routine... none of it worked for me. I really just need every possible minute in bed! Then it's a quick coffee, getting the kids ready for school, and in between trying to find a moment to pick an outfit and put on some makeup.

How do you unwind after a long day at work?

For me, it's all about being with my family and our dog Luna — the kids are such a joy, but also a fun and lively challenge every day! And when I want a moment just for myself, I escape to my garden. It's truly my happy place. I've probably spent a small fortune on flowers over the years, but it's worth every cent. I love looking after the pond with its fishes and growing my own veggies.

What's your favorite spot in Celovec or vicinity to escape and recharge?

One of the best things about living in Carinthia is that we have pure nature right on our doorstep. In summer, it's all about the lakes — you can go swimming almost every day, and it never gets old. In winter, we're spoiled with ski resorts just a short drive away. It's a privilege to have so many beautiful spots so close to home — a quick escape whenever I need to recharge.

How do you juggle work, family, and still make time for yourself—any secrets or shortcuts?

For me, it's about enjoying life's simple, inspiring moments — like watching a fish swim in my pond or sharing laughs with my family. True happiness comes from having a solid foundation at home. But there's also a lesson I learned the hard way — you can't expect different results by doing the same things over and over. As Einstein (often) said, "Insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different outcome". So, when something isn't working, I make decisive changes — whether it's how I organize my schedule, delegate tasks, or shift priorities. Work, family, and you can coexist — as long as you stay flexible, stay true to your core values, and don't be afraid to mix things up.

Do you have any hobbies or passions that people might be surprised to learn about?

Hip Hop dancing! A great way to let loose, stay active, and just have fun. It's a completely different rhythm from my everyday work and a reminder to never take life too seriously.

If you had a completely free weekend with no obligations, how would you spend it?

I'd start the day with some sport — a long bike ride or a hike, enjoying the beautiful nature around Carinthia. In the afternoon, I'd treat myself to a short nap in my hammock in the garden.

Where did you spend your last holidays? Why did you choose that destination?

Our last holiday was in Tuscany in the winter — a perfect escape. Florence was absolutely magical, shining with its Christmas spirit, and Italy never disappoints. The food, the people, the beautiful scenery... and of course, the coffee — I just love it!

What's something small but meaningful that brings you joy in everyday life?

Our dog, a Havanese, is a tiny bundle of joy — and we've completely spoiled her! Her happiness is contagious, and somehow she's become the undisputed princess of the family... and she knows it!

Are you on Duolingo? If yes, which language(s)?

No, but I'm learning Italian right now — I use my daughter's school books and learn the language alongside her. It's a fun way to spend time together and pick up a new language at the same time!