

PROTOCOL is there to help, not to **RESTRICT**

“The basis for all kinds
of protocol is respect.”

Interview with **Ksenija Benedetti**,
Chief of Protocol of the Republic of Slovenia

Til Lajovic (XII.)

Ms. Benedetti, when we spoke about the interview in the morning, I had a casual monday at work, dressed in jeans. I thought of all sorts of excuses to tell you when I came here, to presidential palace, dressed in jeans, but I rather went home to change. Was it a right decision or would it be just as good to apologize?

When a person enters a presidential palace, he/she shows his/her respect or attitude to this institution also by the way they are dressed. When I am at home, I like to wear jeans, but I never wear them at work. I would accept your apologies with understanding and I guess it would not be anything wrong with your clothes apart from that.

Thank you. But when we think of protocol, we get a picture of some state visit where everyone is well dressed, and we get the feeling that the rules, which apply for such a visit, are very strict and rigorous. Is the form of protocol changeable or not?

There are certain rules, which have to be strictly respected. I believe that the rules can seem very rigorous to someone, who looks at them from the outside. And to a certain extent, they are. There are things, which are forbidden with state protocol, but which can be tolerated with a business protocol. This does not mean that rules of state protocol cannot be modified. The door is always open to some easiness, change, compromises, adaptation and so on. Protocol is there to help, not to restrict.

Nevertheless, why protocol, why rules?

Just to help. Let me give you an example: in 2001, we hosted 15 heads of states, 15 presidents and the host was former Slovenian president Milan Kučan. We had a meal on that meeting, and there is usually a toast. A toast is given by the host, whom the main guest responds. But who is the main guest, where you have 15 presidents. What do you think?

I would not dare to answer.

There you go. Protocol anticipates such situations and the rule is that the seniority principle is the

one to be followed. Seniority principle gives privilege to the one who is longer in the office, the one who has been the president for the longest time. We had the same problem at the Bush-Putin summit meeting. Putin had the privilege because he was president for a slightly longer period of time. If there wasn't any rule to be followed, there could be a mess, a misunderstanding, also a scandal, but because there was a rule that everyone was aware of, there was no doubt on who should give a toast.

Do you think that protocol can overcome cultural differences or does it enhance them?

That depends on the country and on the moment. In principle, one conforms to the customs of the country one travels to. On the other hand, the host country can, out of respect for a foreign guest, accept customs or habits of that particular guest. For example, it is not usual for ladies to wear hats in Slovenia. But when there is a royal visit and when it is known that the queen would wear a hat, ladies wear a hat out of respect for the queen, even if it is not a custom here. It is not a major adaptation of our rules, but in some countries you have to make large conformations. When we went to Saudi Arabia, I was one of the two women in the delegation. We were invited to dinner, but we had to stick to the strict rules of a dress code. It is a question if we would be even invited to dinner as women few years ago. Things are changing.

So how does the protocol deal with such difficult situations?

I remember, it was not so long ago, a new ambassador came to Slovenia and I was to meet him. There was a custom in that country that they neither shake hands with women nor look them in the eyes; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed me about that custom. When we met, I did not stretch out a hand, he looked in the other direction, it was a bit odd, but we managed to overcome the differences. You come across all kinds of situations and they are not difficult to handle if you are acquainted with them. If you are not, the meeting can end with an offended party. This is especially important in business, because certain business can fall through because of those things. Always, when we host a guest, we must get information about cultural backgrounds he or she comes from. But that is not all; we have to know their interests, hobbies, to offer them what is of interest to them.

When we take our guests to dinner, there are quite a few things we have to take care of. For example, we have to know where to sit him. In your book “Protokol, simfonija forme” you suggested many sitting orders.

There are mainly two sitting orders: English and French, but also a shape of a table is important. You cannot make a sitting order before you know the hierarchy, the priority sitting order: the priority sitting order of parties, the host and the guest. When making a scheme, the most important is to know where to sit the first rank; the host and the guest, then the second rank, the third, and so on. The ranks which follow, those from the fourth and the fifth rank on, are usually more difficult to sit, as they are not so clear anymore, especially in business, because the functions in the company are similar.

What do we offer our guests, where do we take them to dinner?

We have to show our guests, especially when they comes from different environment, our local specialties. But we have to think before we offer them Slovene spiced pork sausage. I do



not mean that it is not good, on the contrary, but not all things are appropriate for everybody. Of course, if we take the guests to country tourism, it is totally convenient to offer them a sausage. But as we already said, one has to know the guests. But the guests definitely have to be offered Slovenian wines. We have excellent wines that all our guests have praised.

What is an appropriate gift to give a guest? Value of a gift is rather a delicate matter.

It is a very delicate matter. We suggest gifts of lower price range. If a guest or a business partner gets an expensive gift, he could get wrong information. Besides, the issue of corruption is always present. It is important that a foreign guest gets a Slovenian present. A product of a company that hosts the guest is fine; but you must not just go to the production hall and take a product from there. It has to be something original, for example: your product in a special box. What is bothering me is that just a few companies have a gift strategy. Most companies start thinking of New Years' gifts in November. You have to start thinking in the spring and there has to be a special record of who gave a certain gift to whom. You have to know why there is a certain direction in gift strategy and I have to say that companies usually spend way too much money on gifts. Gifts can be of minimal cost, but they have to be original, they have to carry a meaning, to tell a story. They have to be carefully selected and they have to be selected for

a specific person. Totally inappropriate is just to buy hundred calendars or hundred notebooks and give it to all the people. Calendars and notebooks are a waste of money.

Do you think it is obligatory to give a gift?

Not necessary. Also in the diplomatic field, gifts tend to disappear, but above all, they are of significantly lower value as they used to be. Some countries do not give gifts; they just say; we do not give gifts any more. But usually, it is the guest who gives a gift and then the host has to return a gift. If the guest does not give a gift, the host does not have to return it.

Nowadays, more and more companies devote a certain amount of money to charity organizations instead of giving gifts. Do you think it is a good strategy?

It is a good strategy as long as business partners, who used to get presents for New Year, etc or guest who is expecting a present, are informed; either through media or through some other means. Otherwise, the company can do to itself more damage than good. If it is properly carried out, it is a very responsible act for social community.

Is it a great difference between different kinds of protocol? Do you agree that the form is the same; there are just different degrees to it?

I guess it is true. The basis for all kinds of protocol, state, municipal, business, and even private, is respect. The rules are most strict with state protocol, less strict with business, and the least strict with private protocol, but in a certain sense, they are always the same; respect to an institution, to a state, and to a person.