



To commemorate the founding of the Prince's Office of Foreign Affairs in 1839, the Serbian Government adopted a decision in 2015 declaring 29 May as the Serbian Diplomacy Day. The establishment of the Office marked the beginning of professional diplomacy in our country.

The Act on the Establishment of the Prince's Office was adopted on that day, in line with Article 5 of the "Turkish constitution" from 1838. The decree on its establishment was also the first law on the organizational structure and activities of the Ministry.

On this occasion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed today, in memory of all Serbian diplomats through history, youth role model Novak Djokovic, whose success united the people through a strong feeling of happiness and excitement for his extraordinary victories, awakened the dormant spirit and showcased to the world a strong sports nation, proud of its history and tradition.

First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic paid tribute to Novak Djokovic for his overall diplomatic contribution, awarding him for his exceptional efforts and contribution to the promotion of Serbia's interests and its people worldwide.

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Serbian Ambassador to Iran Dr. Dragan Todorovic was also awarded a Charter for his overall efforts, in particular for securing the return of Slavica Burmazovic's children following their abduction by their father 4 years ago who first took them to Turkey and then Iran. Ms. Burmazovic and her two children attended today's ceremony as guests.

The Serbian Foreign Minister held a speech inspired by all those who through their efforts contributed to our country's reputation worldwide, including the most courageous colleagues whose devotion eternalized their love for Serbia during the state of emergency.

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Full statement by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic is as follows:

"Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,
Your Excellencies,
My dear colleagues,

Welcome to the ceremony marking the Serbian Diplomacy Day. This year, for the reasons you are all well aware, the format of the ceremony has slightly changed to also limit the number of invitations, but this should not by any means diminish its importance as we pay tribute to this noble and highly important profession which gathered us here today.

This year we are marking this solemn day for the sixth year in continuation and a little over six years since I took up the Foreign Affairs department. Throughout its 180-year long history, modern Serbian diplomacy has faced great many difficult challenges. One of them, namely the pandemic of the potentially fatal novel coronavirus which causes the COVID-19 infectious disease, which continues to fear the whole world has seriously challenged the capacities and capabilities of our diplomacy in the recent months. This does not only apply to the Serbian diplomacy – administrations and diplomatic services of most countries of the world have all been put to the rigorous test.

Given that we are today able to acknowledge that our state, owing to the decisive and timely decisions made by the Government, based on the recommendations of medical experts and thorough everyday analysis of the epidemiological situation, has successfully tackled the consequences of the pandemic, I would like to dedicate today's event first of all to our joint efforts and commitment, making the Serbian citizens yet again proud of their country's diplomacy.

If you followed the numerous media reports on the matter in the recent months, but also through the activities that a large number of you here were directly involved in, you are aware that the

Ministry, in coordination with the Office of the President of the Republic and the Office of the Prime Minister as well as other responsible institutions – primarily the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, has been active and engaged round the clock in activities addressing the effects of the pandemic, within the scope of its responsibility. I take the opportunity to underline that the main focus of our activities was the repatriation of our citizens who found themselves, in various circumstances, in unfavourable situations and expressed a wish to return to their home country which they naturally felt would be the safest and most secure place for them. Responding to their cry for help, on the basis of its duty under the law to protect its citizens abroad, the Ministry used its diplomatic network to plan, coordinate and carry out the repatriation of a total of around 19,000 our compatriots which happened to be staying abroad when the pandemic broke out. Building on clearly defined criteria and priorities, 37 humanitarian flights were arranged to the EU countries, but also destinations beyond Europe. Repatriation of 5,010 our fellow citizens was carried out by air traffic, while 14,000 our nationals returned to their home country using road traffic. I would like to underline in particular that we did not disregard the foreign citizens either, who wanted to return to their homes, 809 of whom were provided transportation to their countries of origin free of charge. Throughout this undertaking of ours, cooperation with the diplomatic missions and consular posts of certain countries here in Belgrade played a highly important role for which I take this opportunity to offer my gratitude. These humane and responsible gestures of our country have been met by gratitude of many colleagues of mine and high officials and I can proudly emphasize that I received tens of appreciation letters in this connection. As an extremely important contribution of the Ministry I wish to stress that in the recent period over 200 overflight permits were issued for our aircraft thus allowing a total of 41 Air Serbia flights to transport the necessary medical equipment and humanitarian aid.

The importance of the solid and competent consular service and the network of our country's consular posts across the globe, who bore the brunt of the efforts during the pandemic is best illustrated by the successful resolution of the case of Slavica Burmazovic and her children who were returned to her, and who is here with us today together with her son Tariq. I would also like to recall the activities to repatriate our citizens from Wuhan and Diamond Princess cruise ship in Yokohama early on during the pandemic, at the stage when here in Europe we could not even imagine that the crisis would spread globally. As the strong pandemic wave spreading throughout the planet had struck with full force Europe as well, the Ministry was faced with the need of mass repatriation of our citizens, in the first place from European countries but many other parts of the world as well.

Acting pursuant to the foreign policy priorities of Serbia, the Ministry has in the previous year as well continued its intensified efforts on the further promotion of relations with countries of the region as well the key foreign political partners and traditional friends of Serbia, most notably the EU, Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, United States of America and other countries in the world at large. Over the past one-year period, we continued to cooperate intensively with the neighbouring countries and countries of Southeast Europe. Political dialogue with these countries was being maintained and deepened – both on the sidelines of international and regional events and bilaterally. Faced with a situation unprecedented in the recent history, most of the countries of the region rose to the occasion showing an admirable level of solidarity, friendship and mutual understanding. The decision to establish the so-called

"green lanes" proved to be a particularly important one as it enabled unfettered transport of medical equipment and essential goods through the region. The highest level of overall relations existing between Serbia and its "traditional neighbours" – Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, as well as Greece and Turkey, was being affirmed on a daily basis during the combat against COVID-19 too.

We continued the development of comprehensive relations with the Russian Federation, in line with the strategic partnership between our two states, while enjoying strong support of Russia to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our country. A number of high- and top-level meetings were carried out. In the period ahead, we expect the continuation of activities in the context of the strengthening of bilateral cooperation. A visit by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Serbia was planned for March, but it was postponed as the state of emergency was introduced in Serbia and we hope that conditions will soon be met for its realization. Russia sent significant humanitarian assistance to Serbia as well as an expert team for combating the COVID-19 epidemic from their Defense Ministry.

Between the previous ceremony marking the Diplomacy Day and today, the continuous deepening of strategic partnership with PR China was marked by a number of activities. As an expression of support and solidarity to China at the peculiar moment of their fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, I visited China in February 2020, which was the first visit by a Foreign Minister to China in the midst of the epidemic. At the time China was a dam against the global epidemic flooding, and a country that would send assistance in medical equipment and materials to a large number of states and enabled the procurement of necessary equipment and ventilators in the first place. In addition to the assistance extended to Serbia by the Government of PR China in medical equipment and materials, them sending a medical expert team and their donation in the form of two "Fire Eye" labs for COVID-19 testing, significant assistance to Serbia was also extended by Chinese provinces and companies as well as a huge number of Chinese citizens. It is our expectation that the high- and top-level political dialogue between the two countries will be intensified, i.e., that the President of PR China Xi Jinping will visit Serbia again. We also expect the 9th China-CEEC Summit to be held soon in Beijing, having been postponed amid the pandemic, and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has already confirmed that he will take part in the event. At the same time, we are ready to continue cooperation activities in the framework of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Serbia continues to emphasize its readiness to fully cooperate with U.S. partners, as one of its foreign policy priorities. The positive tone of relations with the U.S. was reaffirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic through concrete steps which showed mutual solidarity and understanding. Serbia assisted in the repatriation of almost 300 U.S. citizens free of charge. The U.S. provided assistance in the form of timely donated tests and medical equipment, allocating aid to Serbia amounting to USD 1.35 million, as well as assistance to 6,000 families in cooperation with the Red Cross of Serbia. On this occasion, I would also like to express my immense gratitude to other countries which provided bilateral humanitarian aid, mostly notably Hungary, Austria, France, Norway, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Poland, Qatar, Azerbaijan and United Arab Emirates.

Last year, one of the main foreign policy priorities of Serbia was also to prevent new

recognitions of "Kosovo" UDI and to work on the revocation of existing recognitions. The success of this policy is reflected in the fact that Togo decided to revoke its previous recognition of the unilateral declaration of independence of "Kosovo" in June 2019, whereas Ghana revoked its recognition in November. The Central African Republic confirmed the absence of a document testifying that the country supposedly recognized the "Kosovo" UDI and thus showed support to Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nauru revoked its recognition in November last year, and Sierra Leone did the same in March 2020 during my visit.

In the previous period, in particular with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have maintained the same level of intensity in our activities at the multilateral level. I would like to recall that, with the aim of providing a "Global response to the coronavirus pandemic", Serbia made a donation to the WHO amounting to EUR 1 million aimed at strengthening the health care systems' response to COVID-19, including a donation of EUR 1 million to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), as the leading actor in the field of vaccines.

I remind you that this year marks the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, as well as the same number of years since the founding of the United Nations, which will be an opportunity for even stronger global promotion and confirmation of universal principles and ideas of this largest, most representative international organization and the importance of international peace and security. On 8 May this year I took part in an informal meeting of the UN Security Council at a high level on the occasion of marking the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

At this point, I would like to point out that in February 2020 the Government adopted a conclusion accepting the legally non-binding definition of anti-Semitism of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Moreover, at the proposal of the Government, the National Assembly adopted the law on the Memorial Center "Staro Sajmiste", which established a legal framework to commemorate the suffering of Serbs, Jews, Roma and other victims of occupation during the Second World War in an adequate manner.

Even today, I would like to say that full membership in the European Union remains Serbia's strategic goal and one of its main foreign policy priorities. We have shown our commitment to European values in action, especially when it comes to cooperation with European partners in the context of the pandemic. We very much appreciate that a high level of cooperation was established soon after the outbreak of the pandemic, after the consolidation of the situation at the national level within the EU. I would like to remind you that, after the consolidation of its ranks, one of the first EU decisions was to reallocate the unused financial resources from the IPA funds in the amount of 93 million euros of grant aid in order to help combat the pandemic in Serbia. The EU support was also provided in the form of financing additional cargo flights for the delivery of medical equipment to Serbia. Moreover, Serbia was given open access to funds from the EU Solidarity Fund, which we highly appreciate. Together with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Western Balkans, I sent a request to exempt our region from the Implementing Regulation on the export of medical equipment from the EU, which was approved and we are currently in the phase of joining the Agreement on Joint Procurement of Medical Equipment with the EU. Our cooperation with the EU during the pandemic also involved repatriation of a significant number of EU citizens by the mentioned humanitarian flights of our national airline.

On the other hand, Serbia used its status of a full member of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism to help return more than 40 Serbian citizens from distant destinations on flights organized by the EU member states. We have also shown solidarity by allocating medical assistance to certain EU member and regional states, of which I would mention Italy and Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus showing that we are partner who can be counted on.

Dear colleagues,

In the previous period, we did not neglect the field of diplomatic education, aware that the constant renewal and nurturing of diplomatic staff is one of the key preconditions for building a strong diplomatic mechanism that we need. We continued to branch out the cooperation of our Diplomatic Academy with the relevant academies of other countries, so five new Memoranda of Cooperation were signed in this area with Tunisia, Malta, Guatemala, Bahrain and Ecuador. We also continue to rejuvenate the diplomatic staff and our young diplomats continue to study at eminent schools of diplomacy around the world, as part of numerous exchange programs.

I am especially pleased to point out that we have further expanded the network of diplomatic and consular missions in the past year by opening the Embassy in Yerevan, which de facto began operating in mid-December. Also, the Decision on the opening of the Cultural Information Center in London was officially adopted in July 2019 and we hope to open it by the end of this year.

When it comes to the visa policy, activities in order to liberalize the visa regime continue through the conclusion of several bilateral agreements, so that Serbian citizens can travel without visas to 75 countries, i.e. to 98 countries with diplomatic and official passports. Our country's passport is ranked 26th according to the Henley Passport Index, but we are striving for an even better result.

An important segment of the Ministry's work is the care for the diaspora and Serbs in the region.

As the President of the Commission for Coordination of the Process of Permanent Integration of Refugees, it is my pleasure to point out that the work on the full implementation of the Regional Housing Program continues, which in cooperation with our friends and partners provides housing for over 6,000 refugee families who had to leave their homes due to the war whirlwind that swept the countries of the former Yugoslavia. This project is a good example of regional cooperation that has the support of the international community, primarily the EU and the United States, as well as international organizations such as UNHCR, OSCE and the Council of Europe Development Bank. I believe that this cooperation will continue in the following period, until the last refugee has his home and a roof over his head.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the end, I would like to pay special tribute to my colleagues from the Ministry who, with their dedicated, highly professional and selfless engagement, made their country proud, and enabled us to successfully deal with the new situation as a team. I am thinking of colleagues from the Ministry itself, but also of all those who were actively engaged in diplomatic and consular activities in the network of our missions in the midst of the pandemic. I would like to thank the

ambassadors of our country who contributed to the timely provision of important information about the situation in the most affected countries by regularly joining in the news programs, and in that way were a kind of correspondents from the field. I would like to single out a few names among all of you, those who were the first line of defense, who risked their health and were not affected by the decision to stay at home, and to whom we owe a debt of gratitude. I speak of the following colleagues:

Vera Vukicevic, Rade Stefanovic, Ana Ilic, Dragan Petrovic, Mirjana Zivkovic, Aleksandar Djurdjic, Nebojsa Djurica, Nenad Maricic, Irena Radojicic, Aleksandar Marjanovic, Danica Bakic, Nenad Rakovic, Dejan Krstic, Dejan Bajic, Olivera Jaksic, Aleksandar Gavilovic, Suzana Kitanovic and Petar Burmaz. Rest assured that your engagement will be adequately rewarded and valorized.

In accordance with the already established practice, today we will award charters for outstanding personal engagement and contribution to the promotion of the interests of our country and its citizens in the world. This year, I have a great honor to award the charter to our celebrated tennis player and living legend Novak Djokovic, who proves that athletes are perhaps the best ambassadors of our country in the world, as to Dragan Todorovic, a career diplomat and one of the best ambassadors in our diplomatic service. You will learn more about their merits in the field of diplomacy from the explanations of recognition.

Ladies and gentlemen, Excellencies, dear colleagues from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I wish you a happy Serbian Diplomacy day, your day!

Long live Serbia!"

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{youtube}HBwtuC4cWU4{/youtube}