

fireside chat H.E. BOJAN VUJIC

Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United States

by Milos Rastovic

The Serbian-American Leadership Conference (SALC) sponsored a fireside chat with H.E. Bojan Vujic, Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United States on May 11, held with representatives of Serbian-American organizations, societies, distinguished individuals, guests and others from all over the United States. Aleksandar Djuricic, the President of the SALC, thanked all participants and stressed that there are fields of life that unite all three constitutive nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as the economy.

Ilijana Todorovic, the VP of Legislative Affairs of SALC and moderator of the event, led the conversation with H.E. Bojan Vujic.

H.E. Bojan Vujic is a former Tennis Champion of Yugoslavia (1992 – 1993) and the first player of the Yugoslavian Davis Cup Team (1992 – 1996). He was a coach of the Tennis National Team of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2004 – 2009). In September 2019, he became Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United States. “I was a professional tennis player for many years and played in professional tournaments such as Grand Slams and the Davis Cup. At that time, I always felt that I am an ambassador of my country. Wherever you go, whether you win or lose, you are an ambassador of your country. Tennis is an intense, stressful, and demanding sport that requires discipline, concentration, and very strategic thinking. In this way, it is similar to diplomacy, where a mental game of tennis is often played between diplomats. As head of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s National Tennis Team, I often had to interact with international officials and various representatives, which helped me build a strong foundation for my current role as Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United States.”

Q - What is the size of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s expatriate community in the United States? Do you expect the results of the U.S. Census 2020 to show an increase in number?

“Based on the information that I have received, I believe that the number of individuals in communities from Bosnia and Herzegovina living in the U.S. is about 120,000, with the majority being Bosnians. But, if we take into consideration those from earlier generations of immigrants, then it is at least twice this number. I believe that Serbs are the largest overall community in the United States. I look forward to the U.S. Census results, as this will be a useful resource for the work of our Embassy.”

Q - Washington, D.C. is home not only to the U.S. Government but also to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Does the Embassy maintain relationships with these and similar in-

stitutions, and, if so, has the relationship been prosperous?

“We have a diplomat assigned to handle, monitor, and communicate with these international financial institutions. However, the main communication with these institutions is handled through the entity governments: the Ministry of Finance of the Republika Srpska, the Ministry of Finance of the Federation as well as the Council of Ministers of the joint state institutions. The relationship with these institutions is and has been very good. At times the pressures for reform have created real challenges for government institutions and leaders as austerity measures often hit ordinary citizens hard during necessary reform and transition periods in our economy. The pressure to streamline and downsize government institutions that are key conditions raised by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank are especially challenging in our government structures where we have joint Bosnia and Herzegovina state institutions, two entity governments, ten cantonal governments in the Federation, and many municipal and local governments. This creates a huge group of employees in the public sector, and unfortunately, a redundancy of responsibilities that can waste resources and prolong processes for getting things done. Often the two entities, especially the Republic of Srpska, are frustrated by how long it takes to pass and implement necessary economic reform measures. The Republic of Srpska is especially frustrated by the large number of public sector employees that has now risen to over 22,000, which is higher than the entire sector of federal employees in the old Socialist Yugoslavia. As you can see, there are many challenges to implementing economic reform that is crucial to our relationship with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. However, we at the Embassy do everything in our power to maintain good communication and cooperation with both of these important partners for economic reform.”

Q - Before COVID-19, what were the Embassy’s primary goals and plans to attract foreign direct investment or, specifically, the U.S. investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina? How successful have they been, or did the Coronavirus halt their progress?

“The Embassy does not set goals for attracting foreign investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the entities. Our responsibility is to support the priorities and agendas set by Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Presidency and the Council of Ministers. This mainly involves providing information and key contacts to potential investors in a timely way. We enhance and assist communication by helping potential investors in the U.S. to navigate better the very complex system of authority, competencies, and responsibilities of government institutions at every level within Bosnia and Herze-

govina. We work closely with institutions at every level of government and have good coordination with the entity governments. Here in the U.S., we have developed under my leadership good cooperation with our colleagues in the Republic of Srpska Office for Cooperation, Trade, and Investment. We have several U.S. firms currently investing and doing business in Bosnia and Herzegovina, most recently NCR, which is Atlanta based and a Fortune 500 company, has developed a powerful center in Banja Luka that shows how American companies value the opportunities offered by both the Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

Q - Not too long after your arrival, the entire world was face-to-face with one of the largest global challenges in history. How did the pandemic impact the Bosnian Embassy and your duties as Ambassador thus far?

“Of course this pandemic has complicated our work as we have to conduct our diplomatic relations almost exclusively by telephone and through e-mail. In addition to following the U.S. Government and the city of Washington (guidelines) we also have had to adjust our work according to the regulations and decisions of Bosnia and Herzegovina Government institutions. All of this has created real challenges for our normal operations. We have especially been disrupted by not being allowed to receive appointments by individuals needing assistance from our Counselor service sector. Nonetheless, we are continuing our work in a responsible way that has adjusted to these extraordinary conditions.”

Q - Can you tell us what the economic conditions in Bosnia were before the pandemic, particularly when it comes to GDP, the unemployment rate, the inflation and interest rates, etc.? Did the country run into the pandemic with a stable economy overall?

“In general, despite enormous challenges created by uncertainty in the energy markets and the relations of key members of the international community, the overall economic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was stable. Economic reforms agreed with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and they were being implemented. The main economic goal was to build upon the accomplishments cited by the World Bank that noted that Bosnia and Herzegovina “have become an upper-middle-income country that has accomplished a great deal since the mid-1990s.” In particular, even before this current pandemic, Bosnia and Herzegovina were having to navigate the turbulent waters of international global trends arising from the tariff disputes between the U.S. and China, trade tensions between the U.S. and the EU (which is Bosnia and Herzegovina’s most important economic partner) as well as from the outflow of skilled workers from both entities to the EU



Milos Rastovic representing the SNF with Ambassador Bojan Vujic

In addition to these challenges, we also had to deal with the uncertainty created by Brexit and expansion fatigue within the EU that has now led to a new policy with new obligations for states seeking EU membership. This is why there was a drop in GDP from 3.6% in 2018 to about 2.9% in 2019. So despite a generally stable and positive economic situation within Bosnia and Herzegovina, several factors were straining our resources, capacity, and limiting our economic growth before this pandemic.”

Q - Bosnia and Herzegovina is among ten recipients of financial aid from the European Union, with a planned financial package of €250 million. How will this financial assistance be used, and are there any hidden terms or conditions attached to the package that citizens need to be aware of?

“Decisions on how all will make the assistance from the EU of the relevant authorities at every level of governance within Bosnia and Herzegovina led by the Presidency, the Council of Ministers, and by the entity governments. Agreements between the key political actors representing Bosnia and Herzegovina’s three constituent nations and two entities will define how this assistance will be allocated. I am not involved in this process as I am the Ambassador to the U.S., but I know there are no hidden or secret terms to the agreement with the EU.”

Q - On a similar note, the International Monetary Fund’s Executive Board approved about \$361 million (€333 million) in emergency assistance for Bosnia. It’s my understanding that 38% of the amount is to go to R.S. and 62% to

Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with both entities contributing half percent each for District Brčko. How will these funds be used? What are some of the primary considerations?

“Again, in this situation, all decisions as to the allocation of these funds will be made by all of the relevant authorities at every level of governance within Bosnia and Herzegovina led by the Presidency, the Council of Ministers and by the entity governments. Agreements between the key political actors representing Bosnia and Herzegovina’s three constituent peoples and the two entities will set priorities and will guide expenditures. The funds will be used to stabilize our economic situation and to help to offset the losses to our budgets and key services. This will assist our economic recovery once measures on social distancing and shut-down of non-essential businesses are lifted.”

Q - In addition to these institutional financial packages, how much do Bosnia and Herzegovina generally depend on foreign aid from its partner countries and its citizens from the Diaspora? In which aspects is this kind of help usually needed the most?

“If we take into consideration that the GDP of Bosnia and Herzegovina is slightly higher than \$20 billion, we can say that the assistance provided by our international partners led by the EU is significant to our efforts to reform and strengthen our economic potential and to enhance and improve governance. Bosnia and Herzegovina received about \$850,000 million in assistance since 2014 from EU funds, EU member states, the U.S. and from countries such as Japan, Turkey, Serbia, and Croatia. The EU alone in this period allocated over 550 million Euros for assistance in seven priority sectors (1. Democracy and Governance, 2. Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights, 3. Competitiveness and Innovation, 4. Education, Employment and Social Policies, 5. Transportation, 6. Environment, Climate Action and Energy, and 7. Agriculture and Rural Development). All of these areas are of great importance for our reform efforts, and we are grateful for the assistance provided by our friends and partners. In general, we agree on these priorities, but sometimes the political conditionality mostly added by the EU and U.S. creates added pressure and strain on our society. This can lead to a breakdown in support for reform, especially as politics and election cycles within Bosnia and Herzegovina tend to disrupt perceptions and priorities for reform.”

Q - The measures that the country is to undertake are considered to be a significant factor that will play a role in which outcome will eventually occur. What can the country plan to do to aim for the best-case scenario?

“Policies will be set in the manner I have already described -- by all of the relevant authorities at every level of governance within Bosnia and Herzegovina led by the Presidency, the Council of Ministers and the entity governments. Agreements between the key political actors representing Bosnia and Herzegovina’s three constituent nations and two entities will determine what course of action will be taken and timetable for recovery. Several leaders in Bosnia and

Herzegovina are already pushing for a rapid and determined response to stimulating economic recovery. In particular, Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency, has been actively leading the response to the pandemic. However, he has also been pushing for decisive actions to the best position the joint state for economic recovery. He has called for easing pressure on small businesses and on large employers of workers through greater fiscal flexibility and lowering or deferring tax burdens. He has also rejected the creation of new government institutions at the joint state level that would add unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles and costs to joint state institutions that are already bloated. However, they are capable if politics allows them to handle their current responsibilities in assisting economic recovery.”

Q - The situation with the incoming migrants on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina has been highly disputed, and it seems to have polarized the public. While some are the opinions that migrants ought to be helped in these dire times, others argue that this is a security rather than a humanitarian question. What is the country’s stance on the issue, and are things currently under control? What are some long-term plans?

“This is another big challenge to economic and political stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, the pandemic has overshadowed this problem. Frontline countries have been left these past few weeks to shoulder the burden almost all on their own. Luckily the number of migrants making their way to our borders has dropped significantly during this time. However, expectations will increase over the summer as economic conditions in their countries of origin dramatically worsen. Several leaders have taken strong positions to better prepare and deal with this threat by taking more restrictive and decisive actions on the border and concerning deportations. Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Presidency, and Fahrudin Radoncic, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Minister of Security, have been the most vocal in warning that this problem can derail economic recovery following the pandemic. Again, forgive me for repeating myself, all will make decisions on how to deal with this of the relevant authorities at every level of governance within Bosnia and Herzegovina led by the Presidency, the Council of Ministers, and the entity governments. Agreements between the key political actors representing Bosnia and Herzegovina’s three constituent nations and the two entities will determine what course of action will be taken.”

Q - There have been appeals and protests to introduce a moratorium, precluding construction of any dams and mini-hydropower plants on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s territory for the time being. What can you tell us about this issue?

“This is not part of my mandate or something that I have followed closely. However, this is a challenge that many developing countries face in finding a balance between the need to develop a greater capacity for affordable renewable energy and, at the same time, protect the natural beauty and resources that are also a po-

tential economic factor related to tourism. My hometown of Banja Luka, has taken great efforts to protect the Vrbas River, and has invested heavily in protecting against flooding, and also in attracting tourism and international sports competitions like the World Kayak and Canoeing Championship.”

Q - According to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s election law, general local elections are scheduled to take place on October 4 of this year. The Central Election Commission’s deadline to issue the election notification is at least 150 before the holding of the election, which, in this case, was May 7. Was this deadline honored, and are the polls proceeding as anticipated?

“Despite several important questions that the courts will have to answer, there seems to be a consensus among most relevant political parties that the elections should proceed as scheduled or that they should be slightly delayed. I believe that an agreement between the main political actors is possible, and that is still possible to organize local elections, but only if such an agreement is reached within the next few weeks.”

Q - As you know, there are several organizations here in the U.S., such as SALC, whose goal is to build bridges between their home countries and the Diaspora. As a diplomat whose job is also to be the glue between his home country and the United States, how important do you think that organizations such as the SALC are in this process of fostering cooperation and outreach, and what are some of the benefits of having such organizations prosper and thrive?

“I value and respect the work that you and similar organizations like yours have made in organizing our communities in the U.S. Having strong ethnic organizations in the U.S. leverages our ability to have our voice heard, especially in Congress. It also allows for easier and more effective communication between our Embassy and the Diaspora that we serve and assist through the various services that we provide. You and organizations like yours are essential to preserving our identity in the U.S. As such, and you can always rely on my staff and on me to offer our goodwill and assistance to your efforts like the one we are engaged in today. I wish you continued success and that we may soon meet face to face either in Washington or perhaps in Chicago.”

Q - For all of those Bosnia and Herzegovina’s citizens who are currently in the U.S. and those American nationals who happen to be in Bosnia and Herzegovina during this challenging period, what are Bosnia and Herzegovina Embassy’s stands at their disposal and how can they reach out for assistance?

“One of the Embassy’s main activities during this difficult time is to inform our citizens in the USA about the Corona virus-related measures and activities taken by the relevant Bosnia and Herzegovina’s institutions about the rules and recommendations regarding traveling to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In that regard, the Embassy has created a database with basic information about all the citizens that contacted us for any kind of consultations or help, including their names, telephone numbers, e-mails, and

other relevant information. We update it daily, informing our Ministry of Foreign Affairs about these changes, and, in that way, making it possible for the Council of Ministers and other institutions to use it as a basis to take further steps and to make decisions in terms of finding potential new ways to help our citizens return home. There were no charter flights so far organized by our authorities. The Embassy was, at a certain extent, involved in the coordination of activities relating to the flights organized by some cruise companies to repatriate our citizens who worked as crew members as well as in a case when American authorities organized the transfer of a group of our high school students who attended U.S. schools within the State Department YES (Youth Exchange and Study) Program. For any Corona virus-related and other information, the Embassy can be contacted both by phone and by e-mail (consularaffairs@bhembassy.org or info@bhembassy.org), whereas there is also an e-mail address of our Ministry of Foreign Affairs (emergency@mvp.gov.ba) at which the ministry can directly contact about it.”

Q - For all of those who may not be familiar, can you tell us about the size and operation of the Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Embassy and its staff?

“The Embassy staff is a relatively small team, composed of seven diplomats and consular officers, involved in carrying out activities related, primarily, to political, economic and consular components of bilateral relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the United States, with two additional staff members responsible for the military aspects (military attaché and assistant military attaché), and a representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s State Investigation and Protection Agency, responsible for intelligence and investigation aspects of the bilateral cooperation. It could be said that the Embassy is a bit understaffed at the moment, but we hope that this could change in the near future and that a few more diplomats will soon join us.”

Q - How many consulates do Bosnia and Herzegovina have in the United States, and where are they located?

“In the United States, besides the Embassy in Washington, DC, Bosnia and Herzegovina has the Consulate General in Chicago and the Permanent Mission to the Organization of United Nations (UN) in New York. While the Consulate Office in Chicago primarily works on providing consular services for residents of the states in the eastern part of the USA, the Mission in New York is responsible for multilateral aspects of the cooperation with the UN and other international organizations.”

At the conclusion of the interview, H.E. Bojan Vujic sent a message to all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the whole world to “stay at home and be safe in the time of a pandemic. President Trump is doing a great job with his team. I hope that the worst time is behind us and that we will be free in a couple of weeks.”